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THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy & Science Fiction

JULY

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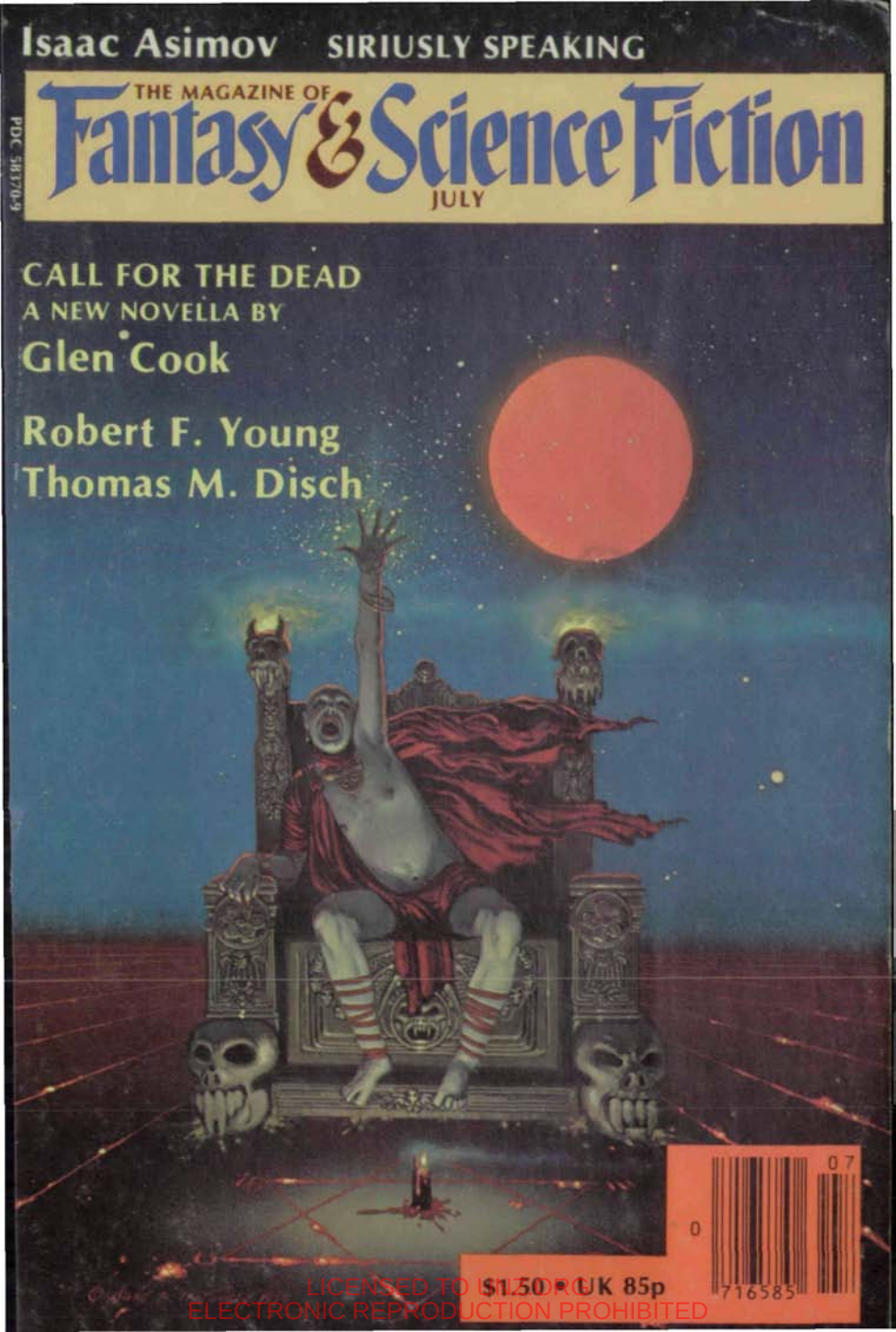
CALL FOR THE DEAD
A NEW NOVELLA BY
Glen Cook

Robert F. Young
Thomas M. Disch



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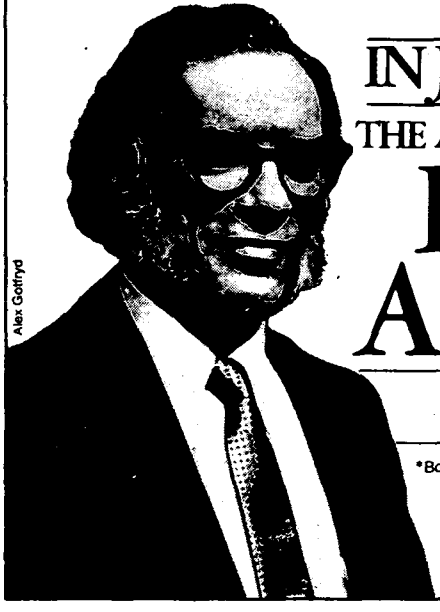

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THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF

ISAAC ASIMOV

1954-1978

*Bob Mecoy, *Future Life*, on *In Memory Yet Green*

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Fantasy & Science Fiction

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The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction (ISSN: 0024-984X), Volume 59, No. 1, Whole No. 350; July 1980. Published monthly by Mercury Press, Inc. at $1.50 per copy. Annual subscription $15.00; $17.00 outside of the U.S. Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy and Science Fiction, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Publication office, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Second class postage paid at Cornwall, Conn. 06753 and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A.

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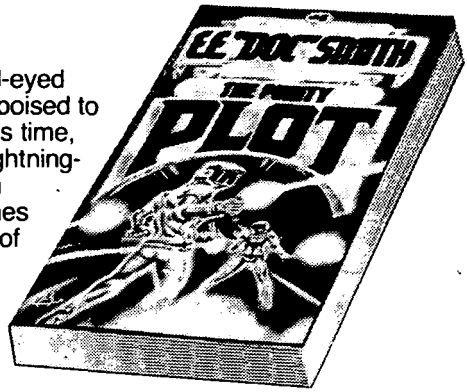

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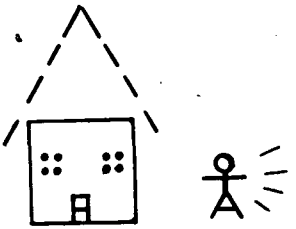
This is the fourth and final story in the series about John Starfinder, the girl — here grown to woman — Ciely Bleu, and the organic space-time ship, the spacewhale. Mr. Young and the spacewhale provide what has gone before, and so it is not necessary to have read the earlier stories to enjoy this one. However, for your information, the previous tales are: "The Star Eel," June 1977; "The Haute Bourgeoisie," January 1980; "The Mindanao Deep," March 1980. The series will soon be published in book form by Pocket Books.

As A Man Has A Whale A Love Story

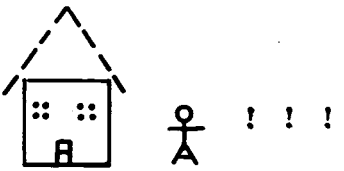
BY

ROBERT F. YOUNG

An importunate hieroglyph appears in Starfinder's sleeping mind:



He turns on his side, hoping the hieroglyph will go away. It does, but another almost like it takes its place:



Annoyed, he sits up in his bunk. *Yes, whale, I know I'm supposed to meet Ciely after school this afternoon. But it's only* — he glances at the clock inset in the footboard — *it's only a little after ten, and school doesn't let out until three.*

Nevertheless it is time to get going, and he knows it. Meeting his ward after school isn't merely a matter of jumping into the Archaeopteryx (her whimsical nickname for the lifeboat, since shortened to the "Arc"), dashing down through Earth's atmosphere and landing on the school's front lawn. Not unless he wants to turn the little town of Muncieville, N.Y. into a magnet for the news media and a mecca for the curious. The people of the 1970s have a

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thing about "UFOs," and the Archaeopteryx automatically qualifies as one. Moreover, its anti-photon field, being only fifty percent effective in the daytime, will add to rather than detract from the craft's mystique. furthermore, the school isn't a rustic little red building out in the sticks, as the space whale's simplistic glyph implies, but a staunch three-story brick structure located smack-dab in the center of town. Circumspection, therefore, is a must. He will have to land the Arc in an outlying woods — preferably the same woods he made use of before — and proceed the rest of the way to his destination on foot.

Still and all, though, even such a roundabout route shouldn't require as much time as the whole seems to think.

Grumpily, feeling twice his thirty-three years, he divests himself of his pajamas and enters the lavatory-shower adjoining the cabin. The cabin is the captain's cabin and he is the self-appointed captain of the spacewhale, an asteroid-like life-form that has been converted into a spaceship. He is also its crew, and, now that Ciely is no longer on board, its only occupant. He is about to actuate the shower when another "little red schoolhouse" and Ciely appear in his mind. The whale, apparently, doesn't think he has time to take a shower. Well, he supposes, it's not imperative that he take one; he just took one last night. A shave will suffice. He steps over to the wall cabinet and is about to reach for his automatic razor when still another "little red schoolhouse" and Ciely etch themselves in his mind.

He peers into the cabinet's holo-mirror. A faint stubble is visible on his cheeks and chin — hardly worth bothering with, and not nearly as noticeable anyway as the star-shaped 2-omicron-vii scar on his right cheek. *Okay, whale, since you're in such an all-fired hurry, I suppose I can skip shaving too.* He splashes cold water on his face and leaves the lavatory.

Back in the cabin, he starts to step into the wardrobizer. A fifth "little red schoolhouse" and Ciely sear his mental retina. Well, maybe he doesn't need a new suit after all. Maybe the one he wore before will do. After all, only a week has gone by on Earth; fashions don't change *that* fast. Now where did he put it? After considerable rummaging about, he finds it under the bunk. It is a handsome $500 pinstripe, on the conservative side, but sharp as they come. The shirt and tie he wore with it are also under the bunk, as are the executive boots.

Fully dressed, he surveys himself in the full-length holo-mirror beside the wardrobizer.

Meet M. Jean D'etoiles, Independent International PR man *extraordinaire*, specializing in the placement of foreign-exchange students.

Satisfied, Starfinder leaves the cabin and heads for the galley.

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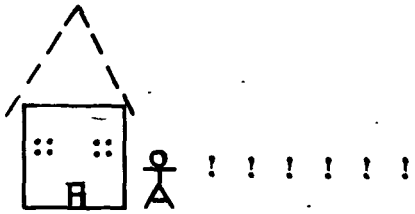


Damn it, whale! — don't I even have time to eat breakfast?

For answer, he receives an even more emphatic "little red schoolhouse" and Ciely glyph.

Dive back an hour then. Then I'll have plenty of time.

He listens for the drive-tissue crepitations and waits for the faint tremor that will indicate the execution of his command. He hears and feels nothing.

Well, no, not quite nothing. He feels the whale's mounting impatience.

You're pressing your luck, whale. I know that in your book she made the sun, the Earth and the stars and that you can't wait to see her through my eyes, but what difference would one measly little hour make?

Silence."

Angrily he about-faces, stomps back down the passageway, enters the boat bay and climbs on board the Arc. The right sleeve of his suitcoat catches on a protruding screwhead as he slides into the cockpit, and instead of taking the time to disengage the sleeve, he jerks it free. Result: a tear near the elbow.

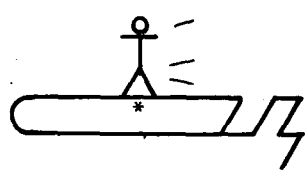
There! — you see what you made me do, whale?

What bugs him more than being routed out of bed and rushed off to school like a tardy teen-ager is the fact that the whale could just as easily have resurfaced hours ago, or even yesterday, and have given him more time to rest up from his ordeal at the bottom of the Space-Time Sea. But perhaps it erred. Certainly it could have erred with respect to the time of day, for the chronograph wouldn't have been able to synchronize its clocks with Eastern Daylight Saving Time till *after* it resurfaced.

Just the same, it wouldn't hurt it to backtrack one measly hour.

He is about to open the outer lock when it opens by itself. *You just can't wait, can you, whale!* A touch on the controls propels the little craft out into space, and there "below" him lies Earth's blue-green western hemisphere. He informs the Arc's A.P. of Muncieville's co-ordinates, and the little craft begins the long descent.

That which has gone before can best be synopsized in the pictographic language the spacewhale devised to communicate with the human race:



(While undergoing conversion in the Orbital Shipyards of Altair IV, the

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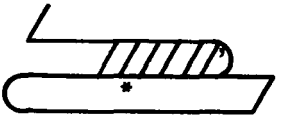
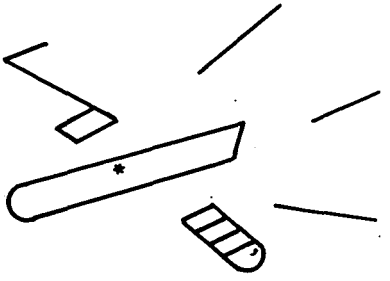
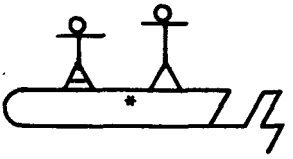
whale — *— indentured itself to Starfinder —* *—, one of the converters, in exchange for his saving its life, placing at his fingertips its ability to travel through both Space —* *— and Time —* *.)*



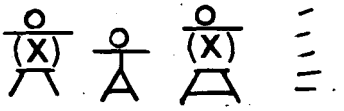
*(Subsequently the whale was attacked by a star eel, which, like the whale, had been converted into a spaceship, and which had been stolen from the Orbital StarEel Shipyards of a Andromedae IX (Renascence) by an idealistic twelve-year-old girl named Ciely Bleu, who had fled from Renascence's proletarian society, whose members she referred to as the "*Haute Bourgeoisie*" because despite their egregious Philistinism they "put on airs.")*



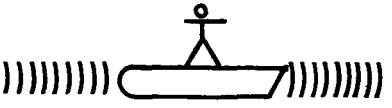
(After Starfinder talked Ciely into coming on board the whale and into ordering her "pet" to release its prey, the whale, its primitive instincts overriding Starfinder's command to let the eel go free, rammed its ancient enemy and destroyed it.)



(Contrite, the whale assuaged Ciely's grief by means of a series of ingratiating hieroglyphs, adopted her, and it and she and Starfinder became three comrades sailing the *Sea.)*



(After Ciely recovered from her loss, Starfinder returned her to a Andromedae IX and left her with her parents, despite the fact that they turned out to be a pair of beerdrunks dedicated to the popular proposition that all men and women are equal, provided they work with their backs and not with their brains.)



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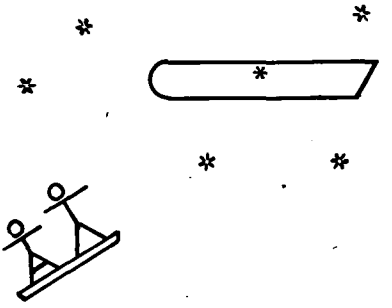
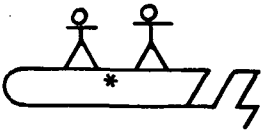
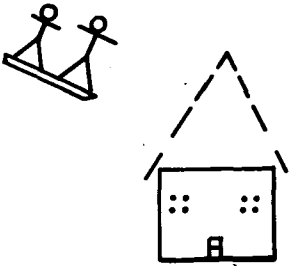
(The whale, outraged by Starfinder's callousness, refused to budge when he ordered it to de-orbit.)



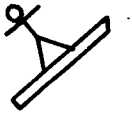
(Starfinder, finally facing the fact that he'd overvalued his freedom and undervalued the love of a little girl, returned to Renascence and brought Ciely back,)

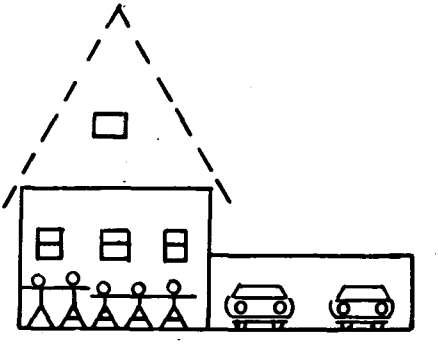


(whereupon the three comrades set sail once more on the *Sea.)*



(At a later date, Ciely and Starfinder agreed that she should attend "Earth-school" for one school year, "to enhance," as she put it, "my sensibilities with regard to personal relationships." After acquiring a number of key assets during the pre-1929 1920s by making use of his precognition, he had the whale dive ahead to the mid-1970s, where he converted the assets into "talking money," established himself as an "Independent International PR Man" and enrolled Ciely in the school of her choice as a "foreign-exchange student" from "France.")





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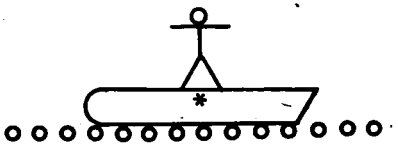
(He placed Ciely with the Runsteds, a respectable upper-middle-class couple with two daughters around her own age, opened a five-figure savings account in her name, promised to meet her after school every Friday afternoon and spend the evening with her, kissed her good-by, returned to the Arc and rejoined the whale in space.)

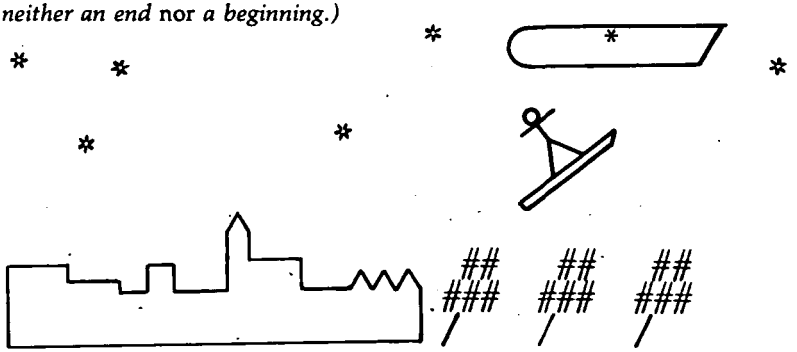


(Rather than have the whale immediately dive ahead to the first Friday and to successive Fridays thereafter, he decided that in fairness to Ciely he should allow at least some time to go by for himself between visits. Skeptical of the "Big Bang" cosmogony and curious to find out whether the "Cosmic Book" embraces a Grand Design, he resolved to descend to the bottom of the ⌐¬ *Sea. There, billions of years "beneath" the birth of Sol, he discovered that the universe has neither an end* nor *a beginning.)*

(Now the whale has positioned itself in geosynchronous orbit off Earth's western hemisphere at a point in time that its computer, which, in liaison with its o.a.v. (omni-audio-vision), functions as a chronograph, demarcated as the "First Friday," and Starfinder is on his way down to Muncieville to meet Ciely after school.)

His first inkling that all is not as it should be is the Arc's near-collision with one of the components of the "Artificial Satellite Belt." According to the little craft's computer, which absorbed the Belt's configuration and the vectors and velocities of its components during Starfinder's most recent passage through it, the object — a third-stage booster from the looks of it — simply should not have been in that particular place at that particular time.

His second inkling that all is not as it should be is the woods in which he landed the Arc during his previous 1970s visit and in which, after throwing in the manual override, he proceeds to land in now. If memory serves



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him right, the woods covered a larger area than it covers now, and moreover, the nearest human habitations appear to be both nearer and more numerous.

But perhaps memory doesn't serve him right, and perhaps the booster the Arc came close to occupying the same place at the same time with was jettisoned during the past week.

The Arc's clock, which the chronograph automatically synchronized with the whaleship's clocks, registers 12:02. Thanks to the whale, he is way ahead of time. He raises his left arm to reset the expensive wristwatch he bought to embellish his role as M. Jean D'etoiles, only to find that, thanks also to the whale, he was in such a hurry he left it behind.

He manages to take a philosophical view of the matter, though not without considerable effort (after all, if he needs to know what time it is and no clocks are available, he can always ask the whale), turns off the radar nullifier, leaves the anti-photon field on, steps out of the Arc and seals the lock behind him. Then he sets forth for Muncieville. The trees thin out almost at once, and he strikes off across a wide field toward the highway that leads into town. The field is planted with tomatoes. He frowns. It seems to him that last week it was planted with string beans. But perhaps he is mistaken. He was in a hurry to rejoin the whale in space and probably didn't pay too much attention.

The field has been picked at least once but is long overdue for another picking, and the vines are loaded with ripe tomatoes. Except for the people in the cars moving along the highway, the countryside, at least that part of it within his range of vision, is devoid of life. Prompted by his breakfastless stomach, he picks one of the tomatoes — a great big red one — and bites into it. He has never before bitten into a ripe tomato, or a green one either, for that matter, and is unprepared for the sudden eruption of juice and seeds. Since he forgot to bring a handkerchief, he is reduced to wiping his mouth and chin upon his coat sleeve.

Undaunted, he continues eating the tomato and resumes walking toward the highway. By taking small, fastidious bites he manages to avert further eruptions, but now a new peril calls itself to his attention. It rained hard, either during the night or that morning, and the rows between the vines are muddy and in places there are puddles of water. He has already walked through one of the puddles, and although he manages to avoid walking through any more of them, he cannot avoid the mud, and by the time he reaches the highway his executive boots and the cuffless cuffs of his suit-pants are a mess.

Oh, well, the sun is hot, and maybe the mud will have dried and fallen off when he gets to where he is going. He sets off along the shoulder in the direction of Muncieville. The little town is

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about two miles distant. He can get there easily in an hour — less, if one of the passing cars gives him a lift. He considers soliciting one. Although he has never hitchhiked, he is familiar with the technique, having observed it on several occasions during his previous twentieth-century sojourns on the planet. However, he decides against employing it. Thanks to the whale, he already has too much time to kill before school lets out. He may as well kill some of it walking.

As he trudges along the shoulder, the passing cars strike a discordant note in his mind. Not a loud one, but one that annoys him just the same. At length he realizes that there are fewer of them than there should be. Moreover, the majority of them appear to be "compacts" or "subcompacts," and those that are full-sized appear to be falling apart.

He reminds himself that he spent only a few days in the 1970s and that those few days were devoted to enrolling Ciely in school and in establishing her in the Runsted ménage, not in looking at automobiles. Chances are, the discordant note originated inside rather than outside his head.

Muncieville, unless defined by its city limits, does not begin abruptly; it comes gradually into being. The buildings along the highway multiply and the distances separating them shrink. At length a sign appears on the right-hand side of the highway. It reads, *30 M.P.H.* Finally, another sign denotes the village proper:

MUNCIEVILLE, NEW YORK
Pop. 4,204

The highway and the village's main drag are one, and since the high school is located on Main Street, all Starfinder has to do to reach his destination is continue on a straight course, or as straight a one as the street permits. Big sugar maples line both sides of the street. They reassure him that all's right with the world as he walks along the right-hand sidewalk in their post-prandial shade. So do the pleasant houses and the pleasant lawns. So does the stuttering roar of power mowers. So does the simple fact that the grass is too wet to cut and the people are cutting it anyway.

His shirt is soaked with sweat from his two-mile hike, and he is tempted to remove his suitcoat and carry it over his arm and take maximum advantage of the coolness beneath the trees. But he refrains. Ciely has probably told her schoolmates, if she is running true to form, that a rich and influential businessman from France is going to meet her after school and carry her books home, and he must look the way both she and they will expect him to look. He must keep in mind that he is no longer John Starfinder, Spacebum, but M. Jean D'etoiles, Independent International PR Man *extraordinaire*.

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He wishes, though, that he's had time to shave, and that there were some way he could get the mud off his pantlegs and executive boots.

Traffic is light, and there are but few pedestrians. Those he passes either do not look at him at all, or look at him and then look quickly away — the sort of mild zenophobia one encounters in most small American towns. He passes the street where the Runsteds live — Hill Street — but their house is too far up the hill for him to get a glimpse of it. Much too far up. In fact, they do not really live on Hill Street, but on an exclusive extension of it called Alpine Terrace. "Alpine Terrace" looks better on letterheads and return-address labels than just plain "Hill Street" would.

At last he comes opposite the tract of land where the high school stands. Only the high school isn't standing there. A supermarket is. And where green grass once extended to halls of ivy, blistering blacktop and polished automobiles shimmer in the sun.

The near collision of the Arc with the booster rocket, the shrinkage of the woods, the tomato patch, the little cars, the fact that the high school wasn't due to be razed and a new one built on the outskirts of town for another two years — all join hands and dance a mocking chassé around "M. Jean D'etoiles, Independent International PR Man *extraordinaire*".

You oversurfaced, didn't you, whale. You oversurfaced but good!

The whale doesn't "say" anything.

Having viewed the supermarket through Starfinder's eyes, it is probably as flabbergasted as he is.

You could have at least looked before you made me leap!

Still no response.

Starfinder knows he is being unfair, that the whale didn't look, first of all, because it wanted its first glimpse of Ciely to be horizontal, through the man's eyes, rather than vertical, via its o.a.v.; and secondly because it assumed, just as Starfinder did, that it had hit the First Friday on the nose.

The possibility that diving "beneath" the birthdate of the sun might have thrown the chronograph off hadn't occurred to it any more than it had occurred to him.

But, clearly, that is what must have happened.

Basically, the chronograph is a calendar-clock, and when you pull the plug on a calendar-clock, the calendar-clock stops running and doesn't resume running till you plug it back in again.

The calendar-clock in this case is the liaison between the whale's o.a.v. and the computer-ganglion. Solar data is fed into the latter by the former, which then translates it into the year, the month and the day in progress on Earth. When the whale dived "beneath" Sol's birthdate, the data ceased and didn't resume till the whale dived "above" the birthdate.

Logically, the chronograph should

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have resumed functioning where it had left off. Obviously, it hadn't.

How many years did it lose? Two? Three?

There is an easy way to find out.

Starfinder picks his way through the parked cars to the supermarket and goes inside. The office is just to the right of the entrance. Stepping over to the counter, oblivious of the girl behind it, he scans the walls for a calendar. There is one hanging on the wall directly opposite him. The month is as it should be. September. But the year....

He stares horrified at the four black numerals.

No, the chronograph didn't lose two years. Nor three.

It lost eight.

"Can I help you, sir?"

He realizes that it is the second time the girl behind the counter has asked the question. "Yes," he says, patching his tattered thoughts together. "You can tell me what day this is."

Her gaze, which has lowered to his tie, flicks back to his face. "Friday."

Well, anyway, we got the month and the day right, whale. "I mean what date."

She blinks. "The twenty-fourth."

Eight years and two weeks....

Presently he realizes that he has turned around and is leaning against the counter staring at the huge signs in the supermarket windows advertising this week's bargains. Absently he begins reading the for-sale items and the prices. This requires considerable concentration, since the letters and the numerals are facing the street and he has to read them backwards through the thin paper they are printed on. Apple juice is on sale. Corn is three cans for $1.49. There is also a sale on tomato juice. A sale on just about everything, in fact, that recently was, is, or soon will be, in season. The time for the unloading of old canned goods is come, and the voice of the huckster can be heard in our land.

"Excuse me."

A short fat woman is edging him to one side. Quickly he walks around her and leaves the store, preceded by a haunted housewife pushing a heaped-up grocery cart and followed by another pushing an even more highly heaped-up one. He makes his way back across the blacktop to the street. While he was in the store, a clock must have crossed his line of vision and etched an image on his mental retina, because he keeps seeing one in his mind. Its little hand points to the numeral 2 and its big hand bisects the numeral 1.

Five minutes after two.

Somewhere in Muncieville stands the new high school that replaced the old, and in less than fifty-five minutes it is going to let out. But for him to find it will amount to an exercise in futility, because Ciely isn't going to come running down its walk and throw her arms around his neck and kiss him Hello.

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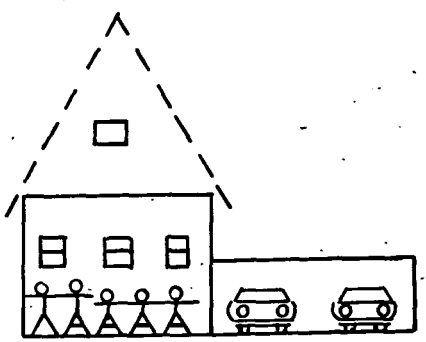
She is not going to come running down its walk, period — unless she is taking a post-post-post-post graduate course, in which case she is hardly likely to throw her arms around a stranger in an eight-year-old suit with mud on its pantlegs and with one sleeve torn and the other stained with tomato juice, and kiss *him* Hello.

What am I going to do, whale? What are we going to do?

The whale doesn't answer.

But it knows what they must do as well as he does. They must find Ciely. They must find her if for no other reason than to ascertain that she is all right. And the logical place to start looking is the Runsteds'. If Ciely isn't there, Mr. or Mrs. Runsted can tell him where she went.

Is *she there, whale?*



No, but Mr. and Mrs. Runsted are.

Look for her, whale. Look for her everywhere. Cover the whole planet, if you have to.

It is a superfluous command, if ever there was one. The whale, no doubt, has been looking for her ever since it discovered that the high school she was supposed to be attending no longer exists, and realized the terrible truth. Looking for her like a frenzied nanny. But frenzied or not, it will find her, no matter where she may be. Its erstwhile rapport with her was such that in the unlikely event its o.a.v. shouldn't be up to the task, it will be able to single her out from the rest of the people on Earth by means of her thought pattern alone.

Meanwhile, I'll pay the Runsteds a visit.

He begins walking back along Main toward Hill Street.

Ideally, he could return to the Arc (or have the whale, which numbers psychokinesis among its other abilities, bring it to him), rejoin the whale in space, backtrack eight years and two weeks, return to Earth and meet Ciely when he was supposed to. That way, she would be spared the disappointment of being stood up that First Friday and wouldn't have to suffer the demoralizing heartbreak that must have been hers when it became evident that her beloved Starfinder and her even more beloved Charles (her name for the whale) had left her in the lurch. And he and the whale would not be confronted with a situation neither knows quite how to cope with.

Ideally, yes. Practicably, no. Ciely's disappointment and heartbreak are *faits accompli*. And her continued presence on Earth is woven into the sleeve of Time. Time would not be apt

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to unravel that sleeve to accommodate a mere man and a mere whale. More likely, it would snip off the two loose threads the man and the whale would represent.

Alpine Terrace has not changed appreciably during the "eight years" since Starfinder last saw it. Oh, the trees are taller, but not noticeably so, and there are a number of small Schwedler's maples growing where only grass grew before, and probably there are new cracks in the sidewalk, and no doubt the street has been resurfaced at least once. But, basically, Alpine Terrace is still the same snobbish little adjunct he visited eight years/one week ago.

When he comes opposite the Runsteds', he pauses a moment before starting up the little walk that leads to the main entrance. The day, unusually warm for so late in the year, seems to have grown warmer, and he is sweating like a longshoreman. His shirt is soaked, and there are dark crescents under the arms of his suitcoat. Worse, his self-confidence has deteriorated along with his appearance.

The whale's extrapolated hieroglyph of the house and adjoining garage, while basically accurate, does neither justice. The house is Early American and in the $50-75,000 range (probably in the $100-150,000 range by now). The front door is aproned by a utilitarian veranda, and the windows are flanked by blue shutters (eight years ago, they were green). The walk that leads up to the veranda right-angles after reaching the steps and extends to a wide blacktop driveway. Mr. Runsted operates his business in his home, and there is a side entrance that provides direct access to his office. Above the door, a shingle reads *Runsted Realty*. The adjoining garage is just beyond the entrance, and its trim is painted the same shade of blue as the shutters. At the moment its overhead doors are recessed, and Mr. Runsted's prestige-mobile can be seen standing side by side with Mrs. Runsted's compact. It is a sign of the times that the former has shrunk to the dimensions of the latter.

Behind the house and garage lies the spacious backyard where, during the warm months, the Runsteds do most of their living — or did, anyway, at the time of Starfinder's previous visit. There is a big above-ground swimming pool, a brick barbecue, lawn furniture galore and a patio that runs the width of the house. The backyard is hidden by the house as Starfinder walks up the walk and climbs the veranda steps, but memory provides him with an unobstructed, if eight-year-old view. Before settling on the Runsteds as suitable hosts, he investigated not only their social and economic background but their habitat as well. Mr. and Mrs. Runsted had been eager to conduct him on a Grand Tour, in part because of the added prestige having an exchange student living with them would provide, and in

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part because of the $5,000 that would be theirs if their abode passed muster. It failed to occur to them that so munificent a remuneration might be designed to dissuade them from having "M. Jean D'etoile's" credentials checked out, and from too deeply resenting Ciely's being enrolled in high school when their own two daughters, one of whom was four months and the other a year and a half older than she, were still in elementary school.

Starfinder was unimpressed, either by the habitat or its inhabitants. But both constituted the solid, if prosaic, ground Ciely would be safest on. Thus, when Ciely put forward no objections, he left her with the Runsteds.

Mrs. Runsted answers the door. Eight years have not greatly altered her appearance. Oh, she has put on a few pounds here and there, and she has acquired that peculiar hardness of countenance he has come to associate with aging middle-class American housewives and that probably results less from disenchantment than from too much getting and spending. But essentially she is still the same Mrs. Runsted who beamed at him like a first-magnitude star when he observed that she and her two daughters, Linda and Lucy, resembled three sisters far more than they did *"mere et jeune filles."* He is somewhat disconcerted, however, by her mauve, mesh-like dress which conceals her body about as effectively as a fishnet would and whose justification is undermined by the background hum of an air conditioner.

After a measured look at him she starts to close the door in his face, which the eight years since she saw it last have apparently erased from her mnemonic slate. "I'm Jean D'etoiles," he says quickly. "I've come about Ciely Bleu."

The words function as a wedge. The door stops, mere inches from the jamb, then swings back. Recognition is immediately countered by disbelief. "You *can't* be. You're too young." The disbelief in her eyes dissolves. "But you are, aren't you. You're that awful brat's good-for-nothing Uncle John!"

Starfinder is indignant. "She's not an awful brat and I'm not her Uncle John. She's a fine, intelligent French girl who wanted to broaden her education, and I'm Jean D'etoiles, the Independent International PR Man who arranged for her to study in America. Circumstances over which I had no control prevented my returning for her till now."

Mrs. Runsted doesn't seem to have heard a word he said. "Fred," she calls over her shoulder, "guess who's here! Ciely's good-for-nothing Uncle John!" She looks Starfinder over, her gaze lingering on his tie and then on his mud-caked executive boots. He feels like a delivery boy who knocked on the wrong door. Finally, "I suppose you may as well come in," she says.

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Warily he steps into a cool, carpeted anteroom. Mrs. Runsted closes the door behind him but doesn't extend her invitation to include the living room that adjoins the anteroom and is demarcated from it by subtleties of décor and color. A Moloch-like TV console squats on its haunches in a far corner. In its huge, polychromatic belly a young woman and a young man with blue-green complexions and orange hair are engaged in earnest conversation. "You can't do this to me, Bruce. I won't stand for it!" "Please listen to me, Tracy. Deborah and I—" "Deborah, my best friend! To think that she'd fuck you behind my back!" "Tracy, get hold of yourself! It's not the way you think. My love for Debbie and hers for me is on a noble plane neither of us knew existed till our eyes touched on that unforgettable afternoon over cocktails at Gimbetti's. We—"

Mr. Runsted's entry into the living room draws Starfinder's attention away from the intense American drama taking place before his very eyes. Mr. Runsted has withstood the years well. He is a bit thinner than he was, and his hairline has receded appreciably; but the thinness lends the illusion of youthful spryness, while the follicular recession is compensated for by the cultivation of sleek sideburns and a trim mustache.

He advances across the room to his wife's side, silencing the Molochian console on his way. Once, Starfinder was his sartorial equal. No more. The changes in men's fashions have been subtle; nevertheless, Mr. Runsted's neat pinstripe makes Starfinder's bedraggled one look like a Salvation Army handout.

The same disbelief that afflicted Mrs. Runsted now afflicts her husband. "This can't be him, Gladys. The phony Frenchman who foisted that ungrateful brat on us was our own age."

"Where is she?" Starfinder demands.

"Well she's not here — I can tell you that much." Mr. Runsted's gaze touches the 2-omicron-vii scar on Starfinder's right cheek. "Say, you really are him, aren't you. Well, I'll be damned! How'd you manage it? Vitamin E? Testosterone? Anaplasty? ... No, it couldn't have been anaplasty. You'd have gotten rid of that ghastly scar. How, then?"

"I asked you where Ciely is. I've come for her."

"You took your time!"

"I know. There was a mix-up. I apologize. Now, where is she?"

"How the devil should we know? She ran away seven years ago and we haven't seen her since."

Something slides down from Starfinder's chest and lands *plop!* in his stomach. It is his heart.

"You've got your nerve coming back for her after all this time!" Mrs. Runsted says.

"What I ought to do," says Mr. Runsted, "is call the police. They could

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arrest you on any number of charges. But probably there'd be a corresponding number of statutes of limitation you could hide behind."

Mrs. Runsted's lips, thin to begin with, have become thinner yet, and her long fingernails seem to have grown longer. "Monsters like you should be locked up! Treating a poor homeless waif the way you did! Oh, don't look so surprised, 'Monsieur Jean D'etoiles'! Your niece told us the whole story. About how you repeatedly sexually molested her after her parents passed away, leaving her in your charge. About how you decided to get rid of her and hit upon the scheme of passing her off as a foreign-exchange student from France. About how you bought us off with part of her inheritance and told her you were going to use the rest of it to finance an expedition to South Africa to mine diamonds so that you could become rich and you and her could spend your summers on the Riviera, and how what you really planned to do all along was to blow her parents' hard-earned money on wine, women and song. Oh, she told us everything, 'Monsieur Jean D'etoiles'!"

For a while Starfinder doesn't say anything. He can't. At length, "When did she tell you?" he asks weakly. "When did she tell you all that?"

"The day before she ran away. She'd finally realized, I guess, that you weren't *ever* going to come back for her and that there wasn't any point in keeping up the pretense any longer. She said she could forgive you for everything except breaking your promise. Even for stealing her inheritance. And as for your sexually molesting her, she said she hadn't minded that, except a little bit at first, and that after a while she'd sort of got to like it."

"She said *that?*"

"She certainly did. Oh, that's some niece you've got, 'Monsieur Jean D'etoiles'! Or should I call you 'Uncle John'?"

"You might as well."

"To be honest," Mr. Runsted says, "we were glad when she did run away. She did nothing but give us a hard time from the day she got here till the day she left. Well, no, not quite from the day she got here," he amends. "For the first week or so she was, well, I guess you could almost say she was an angel. She did the dishes without being asked to, even when it wasn't her turn; she'd bring my slippers to me after I got done in the office; she never argued with Linda or Lucy about who was going to sit by the windows in the back seat when the five of us went for a ride; you could hear her singing in the bathroom when you got up in the morning, and when she went to school she'd go skipping down the street like a kid half her age. And talk? She talked all the time — talked and laughed as though talking and laughing were going out of style. She told us you were going to meet her after school every week and spend an evening with her, and we

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wondered about that, because we didn't know then that you were her Uncle John. Maybe the reason she changed from an angel into a brat was because you never showed up. She began sulking in her room, and for a while she wouldn't even came downstairs to dinner. It didn't do any good to ask her what was wrong because she wouldn't say two words to any of us. We began getting notes from her teachers saying she wasn't paying attention in class and complaining that when they reprimanded her she'd say something disparaging about their intelligence. She called Mr. Boem, her science teacher, a 'baboon in a test tube factory,' and he tried to get her expelled. He couldn't because her marks were so high. This sort of thing went on for about two months; then the notes stopped coming and she started to take her meanness out on us."

Mrs. Runsted: "She wouldn't have anything to do with Fred or me or Lucy or Linda. And whenever it was her turn to do the dishes, she'd say she was Cinderella and that she had to scrub pots and pans like a scullery maid while her two ugly stepsisters went out and had a good time. She told us the people who lived on Alpine Terrace were muzhiks and said that our house was an izba with aluminum siding. What she really had it in for, though, was our swimming pool. She kept making sarcastic remarks about it all the time, as though it was something to be ashamed of. She said it looked like a big outdoor bathtub with polka dots, and said that when summer came she wouldn't swim in it for a million dollars, because everybody peed in it — *her* word, not mine — and that most of the time the water was probably ninety percent urine. There was no end to her nasty remarks, and here Fred and I were, *supporting* her! Oh, we were glad when she ran away that July. And so were Linda and Lucy, who, incidentally, are both happily married now, and fine upstanding mothers in their own right."

Starfinder looks around for something to sit down on, but the nearest chair is a dozen steps distant, and Mrs. Runsted has already cast several meaningful glances at his mud-caked executive boots, and for all the good the chair is going to do him it might just as well be on Tau Ceti VII.

Somewhere along the line he'd forgot that Ciely was a rebel.

But her being a rebel had been only partly to blame for her conduct. She'd known as well as he had that the Runsteds were basically no different from her parents. That they were *haute* without the quotation marks. But she'd also known as well as he had that they were dependable, responsible people who could be relied upon to take good care of her while she was in their trust.

No, what seemed like a full-scale rebellion was less a rebellion than a futile attempt to fight back against the two beings she loved most and who had apparently abandoned her. Far

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from sulking in her room, she had probably cried in it. And the outrageous things she's said about her "Uncle John" had been pain killers — pain killers that probably hadn't worked. And her ultimate act — running away — had been designed to show Starfinder and the whale, if they should ever return for her, that she never wanted to see them again.

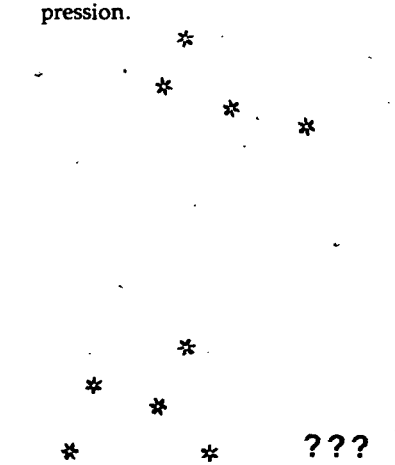
Mere histrionics, of course. Naturally she'd wanted to see them again.

Or had she?

More important, does she want to now?

Certainly by this time she must have outgrown her need for them, and if she'd really relegated them to the Dog House seven years ago, they must be still in it today.

The whale, which is monitoring Starfinder's activities and thoughts, apparently doesn't understand the expression.



it asks.

When someone puts you in the Canis Majoris House, it means they're mad at you, whale. But Ciely's being mad at us doesn't change anything — we've still got to find her and make sure she's all right. So go on looking for her, whale.

As though the whale would stop.

Meanwhile....

Starfinder picks up the scattered pieces of himself and puts them back together. "All right," he says to Mr. and Mrs. Runsted, "I admit I deceived you. But you were well paid for the deception. Now, when Ciely ran away, you must have made some effort at least to find her. If nothing else, you must have notified the police."

Mr. Runsted (indignantly): "Of course we notified them! But they never turned up a damned thing. Except that she'd drawn all the money out of her savings account."

"Nothing else?"

"They found out you were a phony," Mrs. Runsted says acidly, "but we already knew that from what she'd told us."

"What I don't understand," says Mr. Runsted, "is why you've come back for her after all these years."

"There's no need for you to understand."

"Maybe I *should* call the police. Maybe there *is* something they could get you on."

"Maybe there is. But the only

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justice you'd serve would be an injustice. To Ciely. Maybe she needs help, and you'd only delay my finding her."

"You've got a point there." Mr. Runsted gives Starfinder's suit a sympathetic once-over. "I hope you have better luck than you did mining diamonds."

Mrs. Runsted sniffs. "If you ask me, Fred, all he wants to do is sexually molest her some more!"

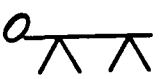
Starfinder lets himself out the door and slams it behind him.

The hieroglyph the whale beams down is that of an extrapolated city skyline:

Starfinder sits up straighter on the maple-shaded park bench he has been occupying for the past half hour. After he left the Runsteds', the village park was the only place he could think of to go.

What city, whale?

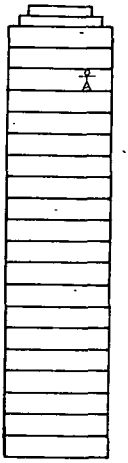
At first he mistakes the hieroglyph he receives in reply for a horse:



Then, spreading out a mental map of the U.S. and pinpointing his location, he realizes tht what he mistook for a horse was meant to be a buffalo.

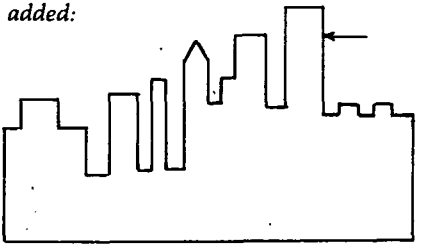
Whereabouts in Buffalo, whale?

The next glyph is of little help:



The eighteenth floor of what *building?*

The extrapolated Buffalo skyline reappears in his mind, with an arrow added:



What's the name *of the building?*

Starfinder frowns. "$$$$" represents "bank." No doubt about that.

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And the stick figure with feathers represents an American Indian. An Amerind. But there are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Amerind tribes in the U.S. alone. To which of them does the whale's Amerind belong?

Logically, one of the local ones. A New York State bank would hardly have derived its name from an Amerind tribe endemic to Arizona or Utah.

Since the whale lifted the Amerind from his mind, the name of the tribe it lifted him from must be there also.

Suddenly Starfinder remembers tuning in the North American Stone Age in the time-screen and watching a Huron named Deganawida set forth in a white-birchbark canoe — later to become known as the "White Canoe" — to found the League of Five Nations. Early in his travels Deganawida came upon the hut of Hiawatha the cannibal and, climbing up onto the roof, looked down through the smoke hole, and Hiawatha, seeing the Huron's beatific face reflected in the gruesome contents of his cooking pot, forswore eating human flesh from that moment on and joined Deganawida in his mission. Together they established a confederacy comprising the Oneidas, the Onondagas, the Mohawks, the Cayugas and the Senecas. The members of the League were known as the Iroquois, and at a later date the Tuscaroras were taken into the fold.

Logically, the Senecas, being native to this part of the state, are the most likely Amerind candidates to have a bank building named after them.

Starfinder wonders if they have any money in it.

No matter. He now knows the name of the building Ciely is in. The Seneca Bank Building.

Is she all right, whale?

Affirmative.

But knowing she is physically okay is not enough.

Is she happy?

? ? ?

The whale doesn't know. Apparently it is keeping its "distance."

Mindful of being in the "Canis Majoris House," it is chary of contacting her.

It is up to Starfinder to do the job.

He sighs. His logical course of action would be to return to space and forget all about Ciely Bleu. Because the Ciely Bleu he and the whale knew is no more. She has been replaced by a twenty-year-old girl with a life of her own, and for him to disturb that life, to risk throwing it off course, will be to add insult to injury.

Nevertheless, he must take the risk. In all likelihood the new Ciely will be revolted by the mere thought of returning to the Sea, there to

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spend the rest of her life in the belly of a spacewhale with no one to keep her company but an old spacebum. But in fairness to the little girl she once was, who was stranded on Earth by the two beings she loved most, she must be given the option.

Finding the Seneca Bank Building shouldn't be difficult, once he gets to Buffalo. But the building is obviously an office building as well as a bank, which means that Ciely is probably working in an office and will be leaving in a few more hours. So unless he wants to go to the additional trouble of tracing her to where she lives, he must get to Buffalo fast.

Sitting on a park bench facing the one he is occupying are three shabbily dressed men in their late 30s or early 40s who, judging from their talk, are voluntary members of the local unemployed. During his brown study, they have been passing a bottle in a brown paper bag back and forth, every once in a while throwing curious glances in his direction. Now, apparently having concluded he is one of their ilk, the one in the middle proffers the conventionally camouflaged bottle. "Have a swig of Muskie, old buddy. You look like you could stand one."

Starfinder could, but he decides to forego it. He shakes his head. "Thanks, anyway." Then: "How far's Buffalo?"

"Forty-some miles."

"I need to get there in a hurry. How soon d'you think I could get a bus?"

"Where you from, old buddy? Mars? Only two busses for Buffalo come through here a day. One's long gone, and the other won't be around till eight, nine o'clock. If you're in a hurry, about all you can do is try hitchhiking."

Starfinder gets to his feet. "Thanks."

"I wouldn't try it in town if I was you, though. Cop see you looking like that, he might remember there's a law against bumming rides."

Looking like what? Starfinder glances down at himself. He has loosened his tie, and for the first time he notices that it is stained with tomato juice. There are even a few tomato seeds clinging to the fabric. There are seeds clinging to his shirt, too. All this in addition to the sweat stains underneath his armpits and the mud on his boots and pantlegs.

He rubs his cheeks. They feel like a pair of wire brushes.

"Yes, I guess you're right."

The park occupies one corner of the intersection of Main Street and Central Avenue. A clock above the bank on the opposite corner registers 3:31. Beneath it, an interstate sign bears the word "Buffalo," with an arrow under it. After crossing the street he sets out in the direction indicated by the arrow. Ahead of him looms a steep hill. There is a restaurant at the foot of the hill, and he decides to take time out to augment the tomato which thus far today has constituted his sole nourishment. Seated at the counter, he pats his

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back pants pocket where his wallet should be. The wallet contains the hundred and some odd dollars left over from his "talking money." Only the wallet isn't there. No one stole it. It isn't there because he forgot to bring it. He forgot to bring it for the same reason he forgot his watch: because the whale was rushing him. Well, there must be some change in one of his pockets. There is. 51¢. He scans the illuminated menu on the wall behind the counter. There must be something on it he can get for 51¢. There is. A cup of coffee. He is about to order one from the waitress, who is eying him suspiciously from the other side of the counter, when, at the base of the menu, he discerns the words, PLUS TAX. He gets up from the counter, walks out of the restaurant and starts trudging up the hill.

Darn you, whale!

There is, of course, both an easier and a faster way for him to get to his destination. Via the Arc. But the whale can't bring it to him in broad daylight without making waves, and even if it could, for him to bring the craft down in the city could abort his mission. SPECTRAL UFO LANDS IN MIDDLE OF CITY; POLICE HAVE PILOT IN CUSTODY: MAY BE VISITOR FROM ANOTHER STAR. Granted, he wouldn't have to land in the middle of the city; but even if he landed on the outskirts, someone would probably spot him coming down; and even if no one did, he would still be short of his destination and either have to walk the rest of the way or bum a ride. Nor will it be practicable for him to wait till after dark when the Arc's antiphoton field will be ninety percent effective, because by then Ciely will probably have left her aerie and have gone home, further complicating the task of finding her. No, waiting till after dark is out. But maybe there is no need to. Maybe he can land the Arc on the Seneca Bank Building roof without being seen. But he may not be able to enter the building from the roof, and moreover there may be security guards stationed there. GHOSTLY FLYING SAUCER LANDS ON SENECA BANK BUILDING ROOF; VISITOR FROM DEEP SPACE ARRESTED; STAINS ON TIE BELIEVED TO COMPRISE DEADLY BACTERIA.

No, he will do it the hard way.

Expertly the driver of the big rig backs the trailer into a slot Starfinder would have sworn wasn't wide enough to accommodate a job half its size, and brakes the tractor. "Nothin' to it, man," he says, noting Starfinder's awed expression. "It all done with mirrors."

Scene: a warehouse on Ohio Street. *Time:* 6:43 P.M.

"Now, to get to where you want to go," the driver continues, "you jes go right on down this street here, keep left where it curves, 'stead of goin' straight which would take you up Chicago Street, keep left like I said and jes keep

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right on going' till you get to Michigan, you turn right then, and jes a little jaunt, it take you to South Park, you turn left then, follow right along South Park, and South Park, it curve aroun' and get to be Main Street, you jes keep goin' right on up Main, underneath that big old Marine Trust Building that straddles it, keep right on goin', and after a while you see this big tall white building on your right with a little park in front, and a fountain, and that the one you want, you got all that, man?"

Starfinder opens the cab door. "I think so. And I want to thank you for your kindness in giving me a ride when nobody else would."

"Hey, man — it weren't no kindness. I comin' this way anyway — you think I goin' t'let somebody standin' by the road all covered with dust go on standin' there till he drop dead when all I got to do is downshift a little and put on my brakes? What that cost me, man? What it cost? Nothin' — that what it cost. Nothin'!"

Starfinder steps down to the concrete. "The fact remains that if you hadn't I'd probably still be standing there."

"One more thing, man. You new aroun' here and maybe you don't know about the brothers. When I give you them directions I give them like you was walkin', jes in case you might have to walk. But you don't have to. A bus come by here every hour or so, and it take you to Lafayette Square. that big white building you want to go to, it jes up the street a little from there. So when you come to the first bus stop, you stop there and wait till that bus come by, y'hear? The brothers — well, some of them, they down on their luck, and these parts hereabout ain't no good neighborhood to be out in after the sun goes down. So you wait for that bus, y'hear, and when it come you get on it and *ride* and where you goin'."

"All right, I'll wait for it," Starfinder says.

"Me, I got to go inside and get straightened 'round, 'n then hook onto 'nother them big boxes."

When Starfinder reaches the bus stop, he waits till the first bus comes by, gets on it and asks the driver the fare; and when the driver says 65¢ gets back off.

He starts walking. In the distance the Buffalo skyline shows sharply against the darkening sky. It is different from the way the whale depicted it, probably because he is viewing it from a different angle. Even so, he can distinguish the upper section of the Seneca Bank Building. Or at least he thinks he can. Its windows, like those of the other visible structures, are infinitesmial particles of yellow light.

Is Ciely still at work? he wonders. The success of his game plan hinged on his getting to the Seneca Bank Building fast, and here it is after seven o'clock and he hasn't got there yet. Surely she must have gone home by this time. And yet she can't have. If she were no

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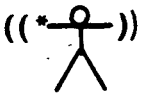
longer in the building, the whale would have apprised him of the fact.

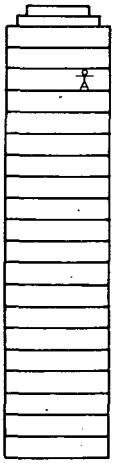
Unless it is miffed because he blamed it for his having forgot to bring his wallet. But it is inconceivable that the whale would allow its personal feelings to interfere with his finding Ciely. It is dying to see her through his eyes. Nevertheless the fact remains that it hasn't contacted him since he left Muncieville.

Are you miffed, whale?



No, it isn't miffed. It and Starfinder are still friends.

Then for Pete's sake update me! Is Ciely still in the bank building or not?



Yes, she is still there.

Apparently she is working overtime.

It would expedite matters if you'd contact her and find out whether she wants to rejoin us. It's no picnic down here, and I hate to think I may be going through all this for nothing. How about it, whale?

"Silence."

The whale, still mindful of being in the "Canis Majoris House," isn't about to contact her. Not as long, anyway, as Starfinder is available to do the job.

Maybe there is an additional reason for its reluctance. Maybe it has peeked into Ciely's mind, skimmed through the pages of her mental diary and come across one upon which she has "written" the words *I hate Starfinder, I hate Charles* over and over again.

But Starfinder is inclined to doubt that any such "page" exists. She may hate her good-for-nothing "Uncle John," but she would never hate her beloved Charles, never in a million years.

By this time he has reached the intersection of Ohio and Michigan streets. He turns right, and sure enough, it is just a little "jaunt" to South Park Avenue, just as the big-rig driver said. Reaching South Park, he turns left. Thus far, he has met no one on his travels. Vehicular traffic is sporadic. A few dregs of daylight still linger in the western sky, but to all intents and purposes night has superseded day. Up ahead, he can see the great

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pillars supporting the main artery into and out of the city, and the lighted Skyway itself. It is in startling contrast to the ruins on his left and the boarded-up brick buildings and littered vacant lots on his right. An arterial Phoenix rising out of the detritus of what once was.

"He jes a old bum."

"Ain't got a nickel in his jeans, I bet."

"How you know? You Superman or sompin!? You see with X-eray vision?"

The three blacks, whose approach the whale warned him of too late, have seemingly materialized out of the darkness itself. The two smaller ones are bigger than he is. The largest looms before him like a tree. All are in their teens.

What was the word the big-rig driver used? Oh yes, "brothers."

The word rang a bell, but he did not bother to answer it. He answers it now, recalling to mind everything he read about the "brothers" when he was boning up on twentieth-century terrestrial history. Politically exploited, dole-conditioned, comic-book bred, TV-indoctrinated; unable to distinguish where the newscast left off and the parade of sitcoms, car chases and giggle-jiggles began. Bewildered, frustrated, resentful; brains blasted by Dust and Pot. Confronted with an "unreal" world that refused to conform to the "real" one encased in the magic boxes in their ghetto living-rooms. Beasts prowling the streets in search of the wherewithal to buy psychedelic dreams with which to wipe the incongruity away.

The tree-tall black steps forward. The two smaller ones spread out to left and right.

Like all arts, the art of hand-to-hand combat profits from the innovations of successive practitioners, acquires, through the years and the centuries, an ever growing sophistication. Within the context of his time, Jack Dempsey was indubitably the "greatest;" within the context of a later time, he wouldn't have lasted five rounds against Muhammad Ali. John L. Sullivan wouldn't have made it to the middle of the ring.

In Starfinder's day, all forms of hand-to-hand combat fall into the category of *kai*. In *kai*, a combatant generates his body's electromagnetism into a protective force-field that softens incoming blows and triples the force of outgoing ones. As a result, the blow the tree-tall black presently lands on the side of Starfinder's head has the impact of a powder puff, while the blow Starfinder throws in return knocks the giant flat on his back.

But the *kai* field fails to prevent the

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other two blacks from seizing him and wrestling him to the pavement. Once this has been accomplished, they begin systematically kicking him, and although their kicks are reduced to barely perceptible taps along his thighs, rib cage and temples, the barrage prevents him from getting on his feet before the felled black recovers, produces a length of metal pipe from a back pocket of his jeans, joins his confreres and swings the weapon in a murderous arc that terminates on Starfinder's forehead. The *kai* field softens the impact, but enough gets through to break the skin and to rob him of the concentration necessary to maintain the field. The three blacks go through his pockets, tear out the one with the 51¢ in it, then stand over him cursing the smallness of their reward. After venting some of their frustration by stomping their victim they fade back into the darkness from which they materialized and which in one sense materialized them.

Under the bludgeonings of the brothers, Starfinder's head is bloody but unbowed.

He stands at a busy intersection, waiting for the light to change. Diagonally across the street from him towers the tall white building he has come so far and endured so much to find. All up and down the street, Buffalonians are Friday-night shopping and/or going for Friday-night fishfries.

He could stand a fishfry himself. Even one contaminated with mirex and dioxin.

His head isn't really bloody, of course. Only figuratively so. The abrasion on his forehead ceased oozing blood some time ago, and he cleansed it for the time being with a torn-off piece of his shirttail. But he is a far cry, both physically and sartorially, from the "M. Jean D'etoiles, Independent International PR Man *extraordinaire*" who boarded the Arc almost ten hours ago and set sail for the good planet Earth. Although he picked all of the tomato seeds off his tie and shirt, the tomato stains still remain; and in addition to the tear in his right coatsleeve there is now one in his left and still another along the outside of his right pantleg. A billowy gap has supplanted the blended-in slit that once gave access to the right-hand pocket of his trousers, and a button is missing from his coat. Were one to assess his occupation from the appearance of his executive boots and his lower pantlegs, one could hardly but conclude him to be a swineherd. Since his departure from the belly of the whale, the stubble on his cheeks and chin has turned into a fledgling beard, and the resentment accruing from his recent mugging has caused his 2-omicron-vii scar to glow a dull red. His bruised ribs ache, there is a periodic pain in his groin, and dark circles have come into being beneath his haunted eyes. The growls emanating from his breakfastless, lunchless, dinnerless stomach are audible up to a

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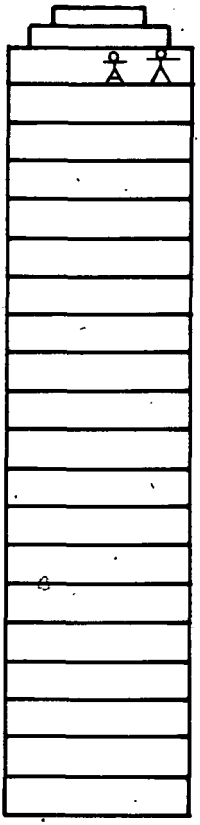
radius of three yards.

The light changes, and he crosses the street in company with a host of shoppers and/or fishfry addicts. Above the several entrances of the bank a large clock registers 7:48. A new glyph of the building appears in his mind as he is passing through one of the two sets of revolving doors:



Ciely has ascended from the eighteenth to the twentieth floor, and she is with a male companion.

Is the twentieth floor given over to offices, too, and is she still at work?

Or is it given over to apartments?

In the latter case, what is she doing all alone in an apartment with a man? Why, she's only twelve years old!

Starfinder shakes his head to clear it. Ciely is 20 not 12, he reminds himself. There is nothing in the least incongruous about her being alone with a man in his/her apartment.

Maybe the man is her boss. Maybe he is her husband. Maybe he is both.

Anyway, Starfinder doesn't know for certain that it is an apartment they are alone in. He doesn't even know for certain that they are alone. The whale's hieroglyphs are not noted for their explicitness.

He has passed through the revolving door and now finds himself in a huge, green-carpeted lobby with banking facilities to his right and banking facilities to his left. In the rear of the lobby a green-carpeted hallway provides access to the elevators. Stationed by it is a blue-uniformed security guard. Starfinder saunters past him with every ounce of nonchalance he can muster and tries to blend into the crowd of people who are already awaiting transportation to the upper floors. Locating the directory, he discovers that the twentieth floor is given over to a restaurant. The Skyview Suite. The mystery is solved: Ciely, after a long day's grind at the office, is

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dining out, either with a male co-worker or with her boss, either of whom may or may not be her husband.

Starfinder finds the 10-20 express and stations himself as close to it as he can get. He ignores the disapproving glances cast at him from all sides, but he cannot ignore the look the security guard is according him. The man seems unable to make up his mind whether to accost him or not. Presently he takes a hesitant step in his direction. Another, this one less hesitant. It is a race now, between the approaching guard and the (presumably) approaching elevator. Who/which will arrive first? The guard is handicapped by the crowd. He has to pick his way through the people. But he is determined now. Closer and closer he comes. Still no sign of the elevator. Closer —

Do something, whale!

Abruptly the guard stops in his tracks. His eyes bug out slightly. So do the eyes of the people waiting to be borne aloft. The hieroglyph responsible for this ocular phenomenon also appeared in Starfinder's mind:

At this point, the 10-20 arrives, and he manages to squeeze into it. His last glimpse of the guard shows him still standing stockstill, his eyes gradually receding into their sockets. The door closes and the 10-20 takes off like a rocket.

"Mommy," a little girl says, "I saw a pumpkin moonshine."

(Nervously): "Shhhh!"

Darn it, whale! — you didn't have to scare everybody!

Someone has already pressed 20 on the floor-selection panel. Apparently all of the passengers are headed for the Skyview Suite, since none of the other numerals are illumined. Starfinder reaches over a short woman's head and presses 18. He wants to see where Ciely was before he sees where she is.

He steps out into a maroon-carpeted lobby. On the wall facing him, big wooden letters painted a bright orange spell the names *Smythe, Durwood, Eisenstein* and *Mercer.* The lobby opens into a corridor that runs at right angles to it. A door with a frosted-glass window is visible. Apparently the entire eighteenth floor is a suite leased by an ad agency or a law firm. More than likely Ciely is employed as a secretary.

Which of her bosses is she dining with? Smythe, Durwood, Eisenstein or Mercer?

Ad agency or law firm, there is no one about. He presses the up arrow of the nearest elevator and after a short wait is borne to the twentieth floor. Another lobby — a small one this time, with beige carpeting. It is connected by an archway to an antechamber with candy-stripe wallpaper, a chandelier on low, low beam, and

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two white naugahyde-upholstered couches. Beyond a second archway a hostess stationed behind a glass counter is greeting the batch of eater-outers Starfinder rode partway up with, and directing them to the several dining rooms the suite presumably comprises.

He steps into the antechamber and sits unobtrusively down on one of the naugahyde couches. Despite the numerous air fresheners that have been employed to camouflage it, he can smell fishfry grease. It is an indivisible part of the ambience. From where he is sitting he can see diagonally through the antechamber archway and through a half-open door into one of the dining rooms. Some of the diners are within his line of vision and he can see them raising morsels of food to their mouths and chewing them and swallowing them. His stomach growls tigerishly. It cannot even remember the tomato it processed almost ten hours ago. But he has no recourse but to let it go on growling. His 51¢, even if he still had it, certainly wouldn't cover even so much as a cup of coffee here; and even if it would and he still had it, the hostess would be unlikely to let him set foot in one of the dining rooms. No, he has penetrated the posh Skyview Suite as deeply as he is going to, and it is a wonder he managed to get as deep as he did. He will wait for Ciely right here in the antechamber, and when she leaves on the arm of her escort, he will make his presence known to her, and she can take over from there. If she wants to return with him to the belly of the whale, fine. If she doesn't, that will be okay too. But at least she will have been given the option.

Another batch of eater-outers arrive, are greeted by the hostess and forth with blessings sent to the various *salles à manger*. For the first time, the hostess's eyes fall on Starfinder. She gives a little start; then, recovering, she comes over to where he is sitting and asks if she can help him. She is wearing a mauve hostess gown and her black hair is coiffured into an intricate pile on top of her head. Her face is a study in rouge, lipstick, eye liner, eye shadow and eyebrow penciling. "I'm waiting for someone," Starfinder tells her. "My niece," he adds. "I'm supposed to meet her after dinner."

The hostess seems fascinated by his suit. Or perhaps by his tie. Perhaps by both. At length she raises her eyes to his face, as though seeking reassurance. Apparently she doesn't find it, for she says, "If you'll give me her name I'll have her paged. She's probably finished by now."

"I doubt it. She's been working hard all day and must be famished. I'll just hang around till she leaves."

The hostess hesitates a moment; then, "If you must," she says and returns to her place. Starfinder half expects her to call Security, but at this juncture another batch of eater-outers arrive, driving him, temporarily at least, from her mind.

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Since he can't assuage his own hunger, he watches the diners in the room diagonally opposite him assuaging theirs. A girl is sitting at a table almost directly in his line of vision. He can't see all of the table, and only one leg of her companion is visible. But he can see her. She is framed diagonally in the doorway, as it were. Like an animated picture in a parallelogrammatic frame, a picture rendered the more vivid by the relative dimness of the room from which he is viewing it. What strikes him first about her is her obvious happiness. Her face is radiant and she smiles every so often between dainty bites of food. Occasionally her lips part, and he knows she is laughing although he is too far away to hear the laughter, and the other sounds — the buzz of voices, the tinkle of glasses, the faint clatter of silverware — would drown it out in any case. But he can *see* the laughter, and it is somehow beautiful — as beautiful, almost, as she.

Her hair is dark-brown, and she wears it short, when long hair, judging from the hairdos of the other late-twentieth-century women he has seen, is *en vogue*. When she laughs, the laughter dances on her cheeks and discos in her eyes. He is too far away to see the color of those eyes, but he is certain they are blue. There is a hint of thinness in her face, or, rather, faint traces of a thinness that once was. Her mouth is both expressive and lovely. It has been touched with lipstick — a token touch that seems to say, "I'll conform if I must, but I don't want to." Her throat is white with the whiteness of the snows of Arctica XXI; a little locket gleams beneath her larynx. She is wearing a light-blue dress he would bet a dollar to a doughnut is the same shade of blue as her eyes. Her eyebrows are like the wings of blackbirds, blackbirds flying away. Away, away, away....

What light through yonder doorway breaks?

All else but that light has faded from Starfinder's vision, vanished from his awareness. The dazzling light of the girl ... Why, if I were to walk into a room filled with a thousand girls, she'd be the only one I'd see: I'd stand an instant in the doorway, then walk straight across the room toward her and none of the other people in the room would exist, only her; the room itself wouldn't exist, the house it was a part of wouldn't exist, the town/city, the very world — nothing, no one would exist but her; I've looked for her all my life and never knew it till now, never knew it till I looked up and saw her sitting there, saw her the way Poe saw Helen, the way Dante saw Beatrice, the way Petrarch saw Laura, the way Shakespeare, in his mind, must have seen Juliette when he sat down to write his love song ... the measure done, I'll watch her place of stand, and touching hers, make blessed my rude hand, would, if there were a measure, would if there were and I

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dared, would if I weren't a misfit and a bum, would if she weren't so obviously turned-on by whomever she is with, would if she weren't so patently in love, would if the world she inhabits weren't parsecs distant from my "place of stand," would if — *Yes, whale?*

The whale transmits the hieroglyph a second time:

Yes. Ciely. I know she's here somewhere. I'm waiting for her.

Again, the glyph denoting the object of his quest:

It dawns on him then that he is looking at her.

Someone deep in the bowels of the Seneca Bank Building has spun the dial of the air conditioner all the way over to 10.

It is freezing in the antechamber. There are icicles hanging from the chandelier. The candy-stripe walls are rimed. Particles of hoarfrost glisten in the multiscented air. Starfinder can see his breath.

Or, if not his breath, a figurative facsimile thereof.

Another batch of eater-outers arrive, rush ravenously through the antechamber, impervious to the arctic cold. The hostess processes them with her usual efficiency; then, once again, her eyes fall upon the decrepit old bum still waiting in the waiting room.

Mercifully, the door through which the dazzling light broke has now swung to, shutting the radiant maiden named Lenore from Starfinder's sight.

Why didn't you tell me, whale?

Tell him what? Something he was already aware of? That Ciely had grown up?

No, but it could have warned him.

Warned him of what? That he would fall hopelessly in love with her?

At length the ridiculousness of the roadbed over which his train of thought is rolling gets through to him. Despite powers that sometimes transcend the miraculous and an intelligence superior to man's, the whale is still, basically, a sentient asteroid. What can a sentient asteroid know about love? The whale's own love for Ciely is still the same simple, direct affection it was before. She may have changed physically and she may have matured emotionally; but in its o.a.v. she is still the same charming little girl it watched over like a nanny when she was in its care; the little girl who created the Earth, the sun and the stars. How could it possibly have known that the affection Starfinder felt for her could become a different kind of affection when for it only one kind existed?

It knows now, of course, having

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witnessed the metamorphosis. But it didn't know before.

What am I going to do, whale?

The whale advances no suggestions, nor is there any need for it to. He already knows what he is going to do. or rather, what he is not going to do.

He is not going to give her the option.

His falling in love with her has pointed up as nothing else could have the absurdity of a decrepit old bum in an eight-year-old suit accosting a sophisticated and beautiful young maiden, who to all intents and purposes is a total stranger, and asking her if she would like to accompany him into space, there to spend the rest of her life with him in the belly of a spacewhale.

He will step aside — that's what he will do. Nobly. Selflessly. He will make the Supreme Sacrifice. He will give his loved one an uncluttered opportunity to live happily ever after with the man she is dining with and with whom she is so obviously in love.

When they walk through the waiting room on their way to the elevators, the decrepit old bum in the eight-year-old suit who occupied one of the naugahyde couches will be long gone.

For eight years, her good-for-nothing "Uncle John" has been to all intents and purposes dead. He will remain so.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I'm afraid I must ask you to leave."

The hostess is again standing before him, this time with an uncompromising look on her face. He gets to his feet. His erstwhile self makes a brief comeback. "Are you implying I'm somehow detrimental to the décor of your *poshlust* piscinery?"

She blinks. "If you don't leave at once, I'll summon one of the security guards."

He starts to say, "Then summon one," then reconsiders. If he creates a disturbance he will call attention to his presence, and his "niece" may inadvertently find out her "Uncle John" isn't dead after all, and that will never do. So he says instead, "Don't bother," and meekly departs.

Waiting for the 10-20 express, he contacts the whale: *You've tuned in on the whole thing, whale, so you know as well as I do that we've got to leave well enough alone. After I'm out of the city I'll find a secluded field and you can bring the Arc around and take me back on board.*

So be it, he adds to himself.

Back in the belly of the whale, the first thing he does is set the "clock" ahead eight years and two weeks. Then, after divesting himself of suit, shirt, tie and boots and consigning them to the desynthesizer, he undresses the rest of the way and showers and shaves. By concentrating on his ablutions he is able to keep his morale afloat, but the moment he is done it sinks to the very bottom of the Slough of Despond.

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He applies healsalve to the abrasion on his forehead; then, wearing pajamas and slippers, he descends the midship companionway to the galley and dials a five-course meal — a brunchner, as it were — only to find that despite the abysmal emptiness of his stomach he has no appetite. After a few dispirited mouthfuls he heads for the dispensary, where he takes three nepenthe pills. Then he returns to the captain's cabin and topples onto his bunk.

"Dive, whale," he murmurs sleepily as the dissolved tranquillizers begin their voyage through his bloodstream. *"Dive back to the Fall of Man. I want to see if there was malice in Eve's eyes when she handed Adam the apple."*

One nepenthe pill is enough to knock a person out for hours. Two guarantee him a good night's sleep. Three are tantamount to his hitting himself over the head with a sledgehammer. Starfinder sleeps the clock around.

Awakening, he finds that his appetite has returned, and he orders breakfast in bed. Juice, cereal, toast, coffee. Not until after the mobile mealserver has retracted with the tray into the dumb waiter do the events of yesterday come fully back into focus. He sits there immobile for a long time. A loner alone. Well, that was what he wanted, wasn't it? That was why he stole the whale, wasn't it? To be alone in the [illegible] Sea. Maybe not the whole reason, but at least part of it. Should he rail against the cosmos because it co-operated?

Mechanically he gets out of his bunk, divests himself of his pajamas, and showers and shaves. While he is donning fresh underwear and socks, his gaze falls upon the wardrobizer. Perhaps a new captain's uniform will provide him with psychological lift he is so desperately in need of. He steps into the machine, dials *Uniform, Captain's, de-luxe,* steps back out a short while later resplendent in a snow-white coat, snow-white triple-creased trousers, gleaming black boots and a snow-white wide-crowned hat with gold-filigreed forepiece. A brand new Starfinder, all set to march forth to meet a "future" as meaningless as the ornamental medals on his coatfront.

He marches forth. When he reaches the second-deck corridor, he pauses. Shall he march up to the bridge and play captain of the whaleship or shall he march down to the lounge and watch "old movies" on the time-screen?

He doesn't feel like playing captain. He doesn't feel like watching "old movies" either. But the later is a bit more preferable.

Maybe he can tune in on Ciely and watch her grow up.

No. The game plan calls for him to forget Ciely, not to remember her.

Besides, he told the whale to dive back to the Fall of Man, did he not? At least he seems to remember issuing some such order before he dropped off

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to sleep. Maybe this time the whale found the Garden and its two occupants. It never could before, even with him at the helm; but maybe this time, through sheer chance, it succeeded.

If it didn't, he can take over. Rummaging around antediluvian Mesopotamia may take his mind off Ciely, put to rout some of his loneliness.

So he descends the midship companionway to the lounge.

Entering the room, he is surprised to find a scene already focused on the screen. He didn't think the whale's PK was up to such a feat.

The Garden of Eden?

Fascinated, he walks across the deck, oblivious to all else save the scene in the screen, and seats himself in one of the two viewchairs.

No, the scene is not the Garden of Eden, although there are a man and a woman present. It is a room — a large room with baroque furniture. And the man and the woman are fully clothed.

Moreover, the date registered at the base of the screen is *A.D. November 19, 1847.*

The woman is sitting in an ornate high-backed chair, a book opened on her lap. The man is sitting on an ottoman at her feet. She is in her late 30s or early 40s, the paleness of her cheeks lending her a sort of ethereal beauty. He is austerely handsome, and at first glance appears to be the older of the two. But it is his whiskers that make him seem so, and if anything he is younger than she.

She is reading from the book on her lap. No, not reading, reciting from, for her eyes have lifted from the page —

"The face of all the world is changed, I think,
Since first I heard the footsteps of thy soul
Move still, oh, still, beside me, as they stole
Betwixt me and the dreadful outer brink—"

Starfinder hears footsteps behind him. He smells perfume that can't possibly be Elizabeth Barrett Browning's.

He does not turn. He does not dare to.

He failed to see her when he entered the room because he had eyes only for the time-screen.

Because he never dreamed she would be there.

"—I, who thought to sink," Elizabeth Barrett Browning says, *"was caught up into love..."*

Damn it, whale! — you shouldn't have interfered! Ciely doesn't belong here. She was happy where she was.

"Starfinder—"

What good can you and I do her, whale? She's a beautiful and intelligent young woman with her whole life lying before her. You're a member of an alien species. I'm a has-been and a bum.

Closer now. "Starfinder—"

Still he does not turn. "Ciely, why in the devil were you eating fish! You know perfectly well that many species

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of terrestrial fish contain dioxin and mirex, not to mention mercury!"

"I—I know. But on Earth, everybody does what everybody else does."

"...Why did you let Charles talk you into coming back?"

"He didn't. I talked him into it. After he finally got up enough nerve to contact me. Can you imagine? — the big lummox was *afraid* to contact me! Afraid I'd be so mad at him I wouldn't have anything to do with him. As though I could be *that* mad at him. Or at you."

He turns, then, and beholds her standing a little ways behind his viewchair; beholds her in all her springtime loveliness. Beholds the dew in her blueflower eyes. Is blinded all over again by the light that blasted his retinas in the antechamber of the Skyview Suite.

"Charles told me everything," she says.

"Sometimes Charles oversteps his bounds."

"Well in this case it's a good thing he did! You big goof you! Whatever gave you the idea that a little girl who loved you would love you any less just because she'd become a big one? That she could ever *really* love someone else? That the way you looked would make so much as a smidgin of difference to her? Oh, you take the cake, Starfinder! — you and that silly Sydney Carton! 'It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done—' Hah! If a person wants to sacrifice his neck or his future happiness just so the girl he loves can live happily ever after, the least he could do is ask her first if she'll be happy ever after!"

He has got to his feet and is facing her across a brief expanse of deck occupied solely by the viewchair he was sitting in. Behind him, Robert Browning says, *"You'll love me yet! — and I can tarry your love's protracted growing —"* Starfinder says, "You were happy with whoever you were with. I could *see* your happiness. It filled the whole room."

"Of course I was happy! I've been happy, more or less, ever since I ran away. Ever since I put you and Charles out of my mind. With all that money you left me, I could do just about anything I wanted to, so long as I used a little common sense. I went to all sorts of different schools — I was able to buy 'parents.' I went through business school and got a good job. The man I was with 'last night' was in love with me and I was a little in love with him. But just because I put you and Charles out of my mind doesn't mean I wanted the two of you to *stay* out of it. Sure I was happy. But I'm happier now. This was where I always wanted to be. In Space and Time with you. You, Starfinder. *You.*" She removes the little locket from around her neck and tosses it to him across the viewchair. "Look and see whose picture's in it. Look and see."

He stares at the locket, but he doesn't open it. He knows whose pic-

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ture it contains. He stands there in his dazzling captain's uniform like a bemedaled bump on a log, the same bemedaled bump on a log he became under a different set of circumstances when a little girl needed him and he didn't know what to do. Only, now the little girl who needed him is a big girl *he* needs, and who — miracles of miracles — apparently still needs him.

"Can it be right to give what I can give?" Elizabeth Barrett Browning asks. *"To let thee sit beneath the fall of tears as salt as mine? —"*

"I—I see you've tuned in 'Ba.'"

"Yes. She and Robert are married now and are living in Florence, Italy. In the Casa Guidi Palace. The book on her lap is *Sonnets by E.B.B.* It was just published this year. She's reciting some of her poetry to him and he's reciting some of his to her. Maybe some he hasn't put down on paper yet. See how happy they are?"

Starfinder has raised his eyes from the locket. There is a touch of desperation in them. "Ciely, I'm not up to this. Our time-lines are all tangled up. In my line, a little more than a week ago you were only twleve years old. I know you're twenty now, but when I look at you I see you as both twenty and as twelve, and it makes me feel even older than you than I really am. I—I can't adjust."

"I'll tell you what might help," Ciely says. "You pretend you're Robert and I'll pretend I'm 'Ba.' We've just arrived in Florence, and you've just carried me over the threshold of our apartment in the Casa Guidi Palace. Now, let's take it from there."

"But 'Ba' was older than he was, not the other way around. The analogy just doesn't work."

"Oh, *you!* Who cares whether the darn thing works! It's whether *we* work that matters — not some darn old analogy!"

Nineteenth-century Earth turns imperturbably on her axis, blue sails billowing in the cosmic wind. The stars move sedately along their courses, and galaxies spin like macrocosmic Ferris wheels. The is silent — or as silent as the Space-Time Sea can ever be.

Abruptly the silence is broken as, deep in the belly of the spacewhale there is a scraping sound. As of a chair being shoved summarily aside. It is followed by another sound — the sound of kisses. Perhaps as many as a thousand of them.

A long while later, *"Hark those two in the hazel coppice,"* Robert Browning remarks, unaware of course that there are such creatures as spacewhales and that his "coppice" in this instance embraces a large lounge chair in the belly of one of them. *"Making love, say — the happier they!"*

observes the whale.

"Oh, *you!*" says Ciely Bleu.

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"We're city little people, lady, if it's any of your damn business."

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Besides being the inventor of the stunning new verse form you are about to sample, Russell Griffin teaches at the University of Bridgeport and is the author of several sf novels (most recently MAKESHIFT GOD, Dell). He writes that his poems (we have another in inventory) "were inspired by my coming across a copy of SLOVENLY PETER by one Dr. Hoffman, a 19th century German physician who was concerned with the edification of children in the most direct way possible. The book includes such inspiring tales as the story of Augustus, who refused to eat his soup one day and died within a week; the story of Lucy, who ignored her mother's warnings, played with matches, and incinerated herself; and the story of a boy who mistreated animals until he was torn apart by various woodland creatures. Anyway, I was so taken with Hoffman's approach that I couldn't resist composing a couple of modern-day examples. If you're going to edify children, I always say, there's no better way than to scare them to death."

THE MOST ILLUMINATINGLY DOLEFUL AND INSTRUCTIVELY AFFECTING DEMISE OF FLO, LATE OF UPPER BLOOTON

Sweet little ones, attention lend
To Flo's grim, grisly, shocking end.
Flo lived in Upper Blooton then,
An Eden just off Exit 10,
Where almost nothing went amiss
To mar her Prelapsarian Bliss.

But smallest things, we often find,
Can rattle the serenest mind:
The least cloud dims the brightest days,
The fly afloat in Sauce Bernaise,
The fizzless Coke, the tepid shower,
Will sweetest dispositions sour.

So Flo, though blessed, would run amuck
On mornings when her toaster stuck.
Sometimes the Arnold Veri-Thin
Would buckle and get wedged within,
Or English muffins prove too wide,
Or scraps of heel slip down inside.

She'd never first remove the plug
(As mother warned) but always dug
Her fork deep in the toaster's slot
And rout and thrust until she got
Her slice, by Passion blinded to
The arcing sparks that upward flew.

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One day, alas, it happened that
Her Eggo Waffle was too fat.
It stuck. In plunged her fork and
went
Right through a heating element
To form a fatal a.c. link
From Flo to Blooton Power, Inc.
Her eyes grew wide, her hair grew
straight,
She cursed her hasty fork—too late!
For as a pennant when gales blow
Stands straight out from the mast,
just so
Flo sideways rose with high-volt
torque,
A banner from her red-hot fork.

"Dear me," she mused, "I never
thought
My Inner Light was quite so hot.
But none can say my light was hid
Beneath a bushel." And none did.
No Bridegroom, Peeping Tom, or
Tramp
Could miss *this* Foolish Virgin's lamp.

But as the brightest shooting star
Is soonest spent, our tale's bizarre
Conclusion was on final flash
Converting Flo to soda ash
And freeing all her primal parts—
Air, water, carbon, and Pop Tarts.

One instant still her image hung
In floating soot, and then among
The molecules of air dispersed.
Her mother later found the worst:
What had been Flo was now no more
Than siftings on her No-Skuff floor.

Her mother later, over juice,
Received reporters. "What's the use?
Despite our warning her," she sighed,
"She stuck her fork inside and died.
And charred her brand-new dress-up
shoes,
And blew a twenty-ampere fuse.

"*She's* free of pain and cold and toil
By shuffling off this heating coil,
But we, the living, spent an hour
Deprived of all electric power,
And worse, endured—O Wretched
Ghost!—
This morning's breakfast without
toast."

—*Russell Griffin*

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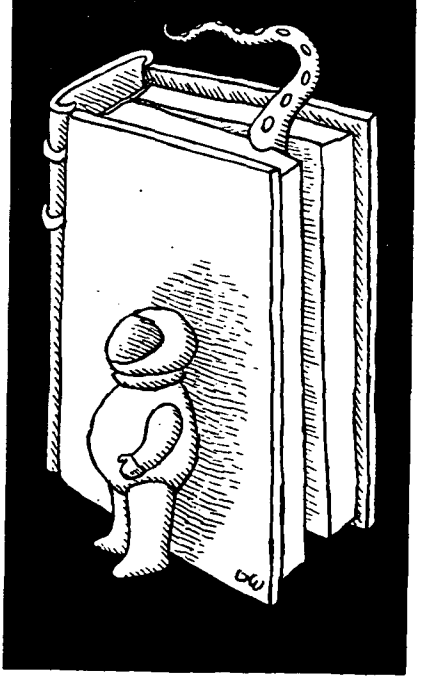
Books

THOMAS M. DISCH



New Arrivals, Old Encounters, Brian Aldiss, Harper & Row, 1979, $9.95

The Golden Man, Philip K. Dick, Berkley, 1980 (paper), $2.25

Dark Is the Sun, Philip Jose Farmer, Ballantine, 1979, $9.95

The Catalyst, Charles L. Harness, Pocket Books, 1980 (paper), $1.95

Fireflood, Vonda N. McIntyre, Houghton Mifflin, 1979, $10.95

Few writers consistently give their best energies to short fiction. To judge by internal evidence, many short stories serve to take up the slack between novels or to channel the spillover of manic moments. Sometimes the results merit attention, but—as any magazine reader can bear witness—sometimes they don't. However, if the writer has a name, even his slightest tales are likely to find a publisher unwary or desperate enough to issue them as a collection. Some writers, by the uniformly high quality of their shorter fiction, would seem to defy this cheerless theory, but even in their cases I doubt that editorial discretion has been responsible. Writers are able to find excuses for reprinting anything they've published (just as the parents of mutants, in all those stories, try to protect their six-fingered, limbless children). Either these all-worthy collections are by writers so unvarying artful that they never have off-moments or (more likely) by those civil enough to employ their creative

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troughs in some other way than by cranking out words at 3¢ each.

Each of the three story collections under review is an honorable exception to the above rule—but only partially. Of the lot Brian Aldiss' *New Arrivals, Old Encounters* achieves the highest level of wheat to chaff. Of its twelve stories, three are among his most accomplished, another three or four are middling-to-good, a few are only so-so, and one, "Space for Reflection" is godawful—full of lame jokes, woozy philosophizing, slipshod prose, and interpolated fables of smug whimsicality, all thrown into a shapeless picaresque bundle of *Candide* as told to Kurt Vonnegut. Not only is it as bad as all that, but Aldiss knows it is, even as he writes it. Witness this bit of dialogue between Dumb Dragon and the hero, who is touring the universe in search of truth:

> "I really must tell you" [says Dumb Dragon] "one of my latest animal stories. Do you mind very much?"
>
> Jeffris enjoyed the man's company. "Make me like it."
>
> "That's good. Story-tellers are brave men—they always battle with the listener's wish to dislike what they [sic] hear, for the listener wishes to be ruler of the story, although inwardly he longs to be dominated by it."

Truly, the only way this listener is ever going to like that story is by some greater torture than having to read it (which I did, every word). It isn't as though Aldiss were incapable of high humor, philosophic aplomb, agreeable whimsey, or sheer madcap invention. But sometimes (it seems) he wakes up in the morning with an ashy taste in his mouth and decides that writing is a bum's business and that he'll revenge himself on the fact by writing something fascinatingly abominable. He's capable of writing a whole book under that impetus (e.g., *The Eighty Minute Hours*), but usually his dyspepsia is dispelled by a single tale.

"Space for Reflection" is perversely (i.e. deliberately) bad; Aldiss also has days when he merely nods, and the result (again, with an interpolated self-criticism) rambles on like this (from "Song of the Silencer"):

> "...I recognize that your intentions, and the intentions of government are good. That you have become tainted by power is inescapable. Such is human nature. Power warps imagination."
>
> "Cut the verbosity!"
>
> "That is my endeavour. I'm nervous, can't you see?"

If Aldiss can't resist the impulse to conquer his bluer moments by *writing* them away, at least he should be able to recognize, with a year or two of hindsight, that the bottom of his barrel is far inferior to the top of his bent and that the twain should never meet in one collection. With a little more patience, *New Arrivals, Old Encounters* might have been a thoroughly good book—indeed, a classic collection—rather than a miscellany of hits and misses, for Aldiss has that essential virtue of the compleat short-story writer, Range.

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The three best stories in the book exhibit that range at full stretch. "The Small Stones of Tu Fu" is an extended metaphor in the most graceful of chinoiserie frames, the narrative equivalent of a perfectly turned sonnet that yet avoids becoming that hybrid anomaly, a prose poem. "A Spot of Konfrontation" is broad farce, skillfully constructed and richly ornamented, set in a future Tahiti, where—But why spoil good jokes by telegraphing their punch lines? Enough to say that Aldiss here combines the mellow bawdry of his mainstream novels, such as *A Soldier Erect*, with the verbal ingenuities of *Barefoot In The Head*. "Indifference" is sf of classic simplicity both in design and execution. The drama is subdued but heartfelt. It treats of philosophical matters that all too easily (on the evidence of "Song of the Silencer") could lead the author into hollow pontifications, but because the ideas are grounded in characters roundly and ironically imagined, their expression has the timbre of life.

When Aldiss is good, he is very, very good, but when he is bad he longs inwardly to be dominated by an editor. Thus Spake Dumb Dragon.

On some days of the week Philip K. Dick is my favorite science fiction writer, but while I'm in the witness box and under oath I must say that when *he* is bad he, too, is horrid. *The Golden Man* is not without A+ offerings, and no serious reader should flinch from the categorical imperative of buying it: fifteen heretofore uncollected stories spanning the years from 1953 to 1974, with an introduction and notes by the author—a First Edition, in fact, for only $2.25. However: a lot of the fowl in this book are turkeys. As such, they have a baleful fascination for us loyalists, who must ask ourselves how the germs of Dick's greatness can be discerned in, Lord help us, *this*.

An instance of *this*, from "The Last of the Masters" (1954), a hyperkinetic foray into hairy-chested-style hugger-mugger. Here is the tail-end of its action-packed denouement:

> Tolby was heavier. But he was exhausted. He had crawled hours, beat his way through the mountains, walked endlessly. He was at the end of his strength. The car wreck, the days of walking. Green was in perfect shape. His wiry, agile body twisted away. His hands came up. Fingers dug into Tolby's windpipe; he kicked the youth in the groin. Green staggered back, convulsed and bent over with pain. "All right," Green gasped, face ugly and dark. His hand fumbled with his pistol. The barrel came up.
>
> Half of Green's head dissolved. His hands opened and his gun fell to the floor.

If that isn't bogus machismo, John Wayne never had cancer. But I suppose we all looked silly, we pulp writers of long, long ago, so I shouldn't cast the first stone.

Other stories here resist being liked by virtue of their depressive rather than their manic tendencies. My least

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favorite, "Precious Artifact" (1964, when Dick was in his novelistic prime), presents the archetypal Dickean situation—the world as a mirage engineered by invading aliens. But the tone is flat and affectless, the supporting detail thin and uninspired, the prose written with a dogged determination to provide a week's groceries. The story's sixteen pages read like sixty—not because his theme is depressing, but because he is writing with his last three ergs of working energy.

I've written elsewhere, in his praise, that Dick's method relies, more than most writers', on improvisation. Characters spring to life and seem to behave autonomously. Such a method is easier to employ in novels, where there's more room, but Dick's best stories display a similar scatty sense of design and amplitude of invention. It may be that Dick conserves his best inspirations for his novels—or else those ideas just grow, like Topsy, into novels, while lesser inspirations wither on the vine. Whyever, his ratio of success for short stories has not been as high as for novels, and these stories represent a kind of second or third pressing, having been passed over when his earlier (and better) collections were assembled.

Even so, the book includes a couple classics. "The Little Black Box" (1964) is a masterful account of Christian conversion as alien invasion; it strikes a Mozartean balance between irony and sympathy. The title story, from 1954, though a degree less quintessential, is a thoroughly implausible though well-worked-out account of a superman of the Blond Beast variety. One can't read it without wondering what the results would have been if Dick had freaked out in *that* direction. Jorge Borges goes to Gor!

But he never would or could have. Witness "The King of the Elves" (1953), a fantasy that rivals Wells's "Mr. Skelmersdale in Fairyland" for its blend of the banal and the magical. The hero, Shadrach Jones, a filling station attendant, is approached one night by a group of indigent, pathetic Elves. They elect him to be their king and ask him to lead them to battle against the Trolls, who are, as we all know, taking over everything. Jones is doubly an underdog, the victim not only of his trollish employer but of his minion Elves (who represent a kind of Divine Schizophrenia *a la* R.D. Laing). While many underdogs may turn out to be supermen when their secret identity is revealed, Dick's underdogs are too grounded in an observed humanity for fantasies of *ressentiment* to come to van Vogtian fruition.

The jewel of the book is the introduction, a meditation on the nature of sf and a memoir of his career, in which he tells of grocery-shopping at the Lucky Dog Pet Store and of writing fan letters to Capitol Records to prophecy that Linda Ronstadt's next record would be "the beginning of a career unparalleled in the record in-

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dustry." He daydreams of the epitaph to be carved on his gravestone in his alternate existence as a talent scout:

HE DISCOVERED LINDA RONSTADT
AND SIGNED HER UP!

It's that beguiling mixture of bravado and humility that gives his best stories and novels their induplicable air of being centered in something more than an alert intelligence; Dick's fiction seems prophetic, not in the trivial sense of predicting events or trends, but in the Old Testament sense, in the sense that Dante, Blake, and Shelley are prophetic, because they speak from the burning bush of an achieved human wisdom. Readers who feel such claims are not too large will not rejoice greatly in *The Golden Man*, but Dick is of that stature where even his failures merit publication.

In a recent published interview, J.G. Ballard remarked that he always gives a favorable review to a book if he hasn't read it. He also professed to find it puzzling that when he'd told this reviewer of his charitable practice I appeared to be shocked. Truly, I am of the puritanical conviction that a reviewer is obliged to read to the bitter end in fair exchange for his pay and the right to crack wise. However, this often leads to a situation where the unworthiest books never received their just deserts critically because savvy reviewers, dreading to read them, don't undertake to review them. That leaves bad novels in the hands of bad or venal reviewers, not an ideal alternative.

All this by way of excusing myself in advance for being unable to finish Philip Farmer's *Dark Is The Sun*. Its 400+ pages grew stiff beneath my despairing gaze and would not turn. This review became overdue, and still each time I'd read another few pages it would happen again. My problem is I'm unable to read fast enough and carelessly enough to enter the hypnagogic state demanded by this sort of book: *Dark Is The Sun* is meant for speed readers whose high-speed attention will construct from the asphalt of the prose a world of low resolution and high escapist involvement; not a novel but a daydream in remedial-reading English. It doesn't work on me. Like a skeptical visitor to Disneyland, I find my attention straying to all the inauthentic details: the concrete trunks of the palm trees, the threadbare astroturf, the staticky roar of the android lion. After a while only the tourists are of interest—i.e., the question of whether *anyone* can enjoy something so routinely phony and, if so, whether it's the inauthenticity itself that they enjoy, or have they, incredibly, suspended disbelief?

It begins slowly. In chapter 1 the hero, a teenage Tarzan, sets off from his barbarian home to quest for a bride. In chapter 2 he saves his dog Jum from a furry blue crocodile, or *athaksum*. In the process Farmer spells out his artistic credo:

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"Hang on!" Deyv shouted. Later, he was to think that this had been nonsense advice, since the dog had no hands. But he had to say something; that was the essence of a human being. Say something, even if it means nothing, because as long as one is talking, one is alive.

(For the entire 100 pages I could get through, Deyv's exploits were frugally padded out with such say-something, say-anything maunderings.)

In chapter 3 Deyv walks along on Old Highway and admires the jungle scenery. In chapter 4 he flees a pack of hungry *khratikl:*

There were perhaps a hundred of them. They flew swiftly, cutting across the wind, their leathery wings flapping. Deyv staggered across the short grass. His legs felt weak, and his head swam. He drove on, aware that Jum and Aejip were not running in their best form by any means. Nonetheless, they were faster than he. A glance showed him that the *khratikl* had veered to cut him off. He tried to increase his pace, and he did. But not by much. Whatever had shocked him had taken a great deal out of him.

That paragraph is representative. Without perpetrating any real, and possibly amusing, howlers, the prose clunks and thuds and hobbles from one perfunctory thrill to the next. The imaginative component is of a piece with the prose: one composite animal follows another, but not one is scarry or even interestingly odd because Farmer's heart isn't in it. He knows, from his earlier imitations of ERB & Company, what formulas to follow, and he follows them like a train on its tracks.

Why flog a dead horse? First, because Farmer is able to produce much better work, when his imagination is in gear, and it should be made clear to him that no one mistakes this mouthwash for roses. One assumes he manufactures it because he thinks it's what the audience demands. More likely, it's what his editors tell him the audience demands, and that is the second reason for flogging this dead horse: *Dark Is The Sun* typifies the worst tendencies of commercial publishing to cash in on any established success with any imitation, however brummagem and tawdry. Farmer is no stranger to such trafficking. Indeed, he's sometimes shown genius in finding legal ways to expropriate literary properties as diverse as Edgar Rice Burroughs and Kurt Vonnegut. But he always showed himself to be a merry sort of rogue in those encounters, outheroding herod with X-rated hypervulgarity. This time he's eliminated all gleeful traces of his own talent for outrage, and what is left is perfectly represented by Ballantine's klutzy, sanitized-'Frazetta' cover art. Science fiction offers so many richer varieties of Barsoom-derived opiates that even the 12-year-olds and the addicts should have a hard time getting off on this one.

Charles Harness's *The Catalyst* is a

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different sort of sad story, an honest effort to write a good book, which fails through one fatal miscalculation: it shouldn't have been sf. An earlier sf novel, *The Ring of Ritornel*, has been held up as an exemplar of baroque pizazz by both Damon Knight and Brian Aldiss—sf as choreographed by Busby Berkley. Unlike that book, *The Catalyst* is set in a gray day-after-tomorrow where not much happens. A team of scientists sets out to find a catalyst that will allow them to synthesize a new drug economically. They do, and then (surprise) Trialine, the drug so synthesized, proves to be effective against novarella, a dread disease Harness has invented for the express purpose of giving Trialine something to do. Along the way boy meets girl.

On these dry bones there is nevertheless enough meat that even two-thirds of the way through the story seemed redeemable. However, most even of these meaty bits, which concern office politics in the chemical industry, are spoiled by the blurry focus of the near-future setting. Harness's incidental extrapolations don't hang together: the industrial scenery seems rather contemporary, but there are grown-up clones on hand — in A.D. 2006. If the same tale had been set in 1980, as it easily could have been, Harness would have had the advantage of drawing from live models. Concerning chemical technology he obviously knows whereof he speaks and can communicte that knowledge with zest, but when the sf elements intrude themselves it's like a visit from Godzilla. The girl destined for the hero's arms is a clone traumatized by her lack of a navel. Even sillier, by way of supplying an apotheosis with some transcendental wallop, she *gets* a belly button. Shades of *Pinnochio!*

To become a rock musician one need not have mastered counterpoint, and one can begin to publish science fiction with only a rudimentary knowledge of the craft (never mind the art) of writing. Characteristically, sf writers have had public apprenticeships. We start off young and — again, like rock stars — are under a certain pressure to remain, as Dylan has it, "Forever Young," since even today's expanded audience is still predominantly adolescent and college-age and wants to read stories that speak to the condition of youth. This being so, it isn't hard to understand why so many of sf's brightest stars have attained their stardom by their mid-twenties.

One of the recentest such stars, already with two Nebulas to her credit, is Vonda McIntyre. McIntyre's stories, collected in *Fireflood*, appeal not just to the condition of youth but, more particularly, to the condition of female youth in the '70's—to, in a word, girls. And why not? Most sf till now has taken the form of daydreams for adolescent boys (e.g., *Dark Is The Sun);* why shouldn't girls be allowed the same cheap thrills? (Not a pejorative,

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mind you, but an allusion to Janis Joplin.)

In assessing *Fireflood*, therefore, I want to distinguish between its strictly literary failings, which may be ascribed to inexperience, and two extraliterary features, which, though I find them off-putting, have undoubtedly contributed to McIntyre's success with her chosen audience. These are: (1) a world view that divides everyone into an uncaring, imperceptive, close-minded Them and a loving, hip, holistic, and victimized Us; and (2) a tendency towards tears. In story after story characters are implored to surrender to their stifled need to cry or else are discovered crying as the curtain rises by way of proving they're one of Us. An instance, from the Nebula-winning "Of Mist, and Grass, and Sand":

> "Can any of you cry?" she said. "Can any of you cry for me and my despair, or for them and their guilt, or for small things and their pain?" She felt tears slip down her cheeks.
>
> They did not understand her; they were offended by her crying.

Well yes, they were rather. Though I can wet a handkerchief with the best of them I do find such solicitations tasteless, not to say mawkish. If a drama awakens sorrow and pity, well and good, but a writer shouldn't *ask* for tears, not, especially, in a tone of righteousness.

But girls will be girls, and *vice verse*. The fact remains that McIntyre is a talented story-teller and, more commendably, a writer who works at perfecting her craft and extending her range. Rarely is she lazy or slipshod or glib (as all the other books under review were, in part or, in Farmer's case, in whole). Her plots unfold naturally and move at the right, deliberate pace. Her characters, when not being forced into the role of spokespersons for Us, are modeled with conscious art and seem dimensional. Once a story has got off the ground, she can write spare, modulated prose of varying intensity that bears comparison to Christopher Priest's or her mentor's, Ursula LeGuin. Best of all (if the arrangement of the stories in the book can be construed as chronological), she seems to be moving from strength to strength. In the concluding novella, "Aztecs" she is able finally to write "paid" to an emotional theme dealt with obsessively, but never quite successfully, in many of the other stories—the need to renounce a love that is in conflict with personal growth. In "Aztecs" the science fictional metaphor is the natural embodiment of this theme, and McIntyre is able to dispense with homilies and lachrymose appeals for sympathy. She just tells her story, and it works.

While *Fireflood* certainly merits an A for effort, it does exhibit the signs of apprentice work. Though McIntyre usually steers clear of formular huggermugger, she is capable of sacrificing narrative consistency on the altar of those old heathen idols of the pulps,

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Suspense and Adventure. In the title story the heroine, a human being mutated into a super armadillo, is fleeing from Them and is slowed in her subterranean progress by tree roots whose "malleable consistency made them harder to penetrate than solid rock." Somehow I doubt that, but if there were no obstacles in her path how would she overcome them? In the matter of extending her range, McIntyre often attempts more than she can handle. On the evidence of the one satirical story, "Recourse Inc.", I'm convinced she has no sense of humor. Her purple passages do not take off on wings, though like the heroine of "Fireflood" she is obsessed with the possibility. She needs lots of room for takeoff: her very short stories lack all pith and crackle. But these are negligible failings and don't weigh much in the balance against the success of a story like "Aztecs." Vonda McIntyre will undoubtedly carry off a lot more Nebulas.

BOOKS RECEIVED

The Purple Pterodactyls, L. Sprague de Camp. The collected adventures of Willy Newbury, banker and occult investigator. Most of the stories first appeared in this magazine. Phantasia Press, Huntington Woods, Michigan. $15.00.

Far Future Calling, Olaf Stapledon, edited by Sam Moskowitz. Volume of uncollected Stapledon shorts (one, "A Modern Magician," appeared in F&SF) along with an authorized biography by Moskowitz. Oswald Train, Publisher, Box 1891, Philadelphia, Pa. 19105. $12.00.

The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, a 30 Year Retrospective, edited by Edward L. Ferman. Hardcover anthology celebrating F&SF's 30th anniversary. Includes stories published in the 30th anniversary issue along with special introductions by Ferman and Isaac Asimov. Doubleday & Co., Inc., Garden City, NY $10.00.

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Concerning a woman whose mind travels across 5,000 years to answer a call for help and who finds herself in deep trouble of her own.

Canyons of The Mind

BY

C. HERB WILLIAMS

No one saw Teraija translate through the *torii*, the gate with the upturned edges in the Japanese painting on the far wall of the cafe.

One moment the slim, sensuous figure in the psychedelic red kimono stood unmoving as she had since the day the artist outlined her delicate figure. The next, Teraija was standing outside the picture in the cafe, a startled look on her face, her body that of the girl in the painting, which now was empty.

In a body! Sounds, smells, feelings of heat and cold assualted bodily senses she had not possessed for 5,000 years. Disorientation struck like a physical blow.

She never dreamed the desperate call she was answering could pull her through into this ultimate phase of contact with the physical world.

She held up delicate, long-fingered hands, turning them over and back, thrilling to their slender perfection as if she had never seen them before, which in fact she hadn't.

She touched the red kimono, running a hand down the soft silk where it clung to her smooth thigh. The contact sent a tingle of excitement through her body, the touch turning into a caress of the fine material. She glanced down at her figure, slim, yet completely feminine.

It was real! She was in a body. A beautiful body! She felt like shouting at the wonder, the excitement, as the myriad smells of food, people, furniture and many other things she couldn't identify clamored for the attention of her new-found senses; a multitude of unspoken voices, wisps of thought, flashes of emotion filled her being, battling with the world of physical sensations for recognition.

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They almost drove that other, tortured call from her mind. She had meant only to appear as a vision, one of the less powerful phases of contact between her realm and the physical world. But the call, all the more powerful for its muted agony, had gripped her as she stood back of the gate, the *torii*, searching for its owner.

She looked back at the now-empty painting, as if to slip back through the gate she had opened with her inexperience. She took a deep breath, savoring the exiciting sensory impressions for one last moment, not wanting to leave, but knowing she must.

She let her eyes roam down over the glamorous kimono which clothed the perfect body whose feelings thrilled her. She prepared for the move back, but too late! The call came again, stronger, more insistent, drawing nearer, holding her powerless to step back. Her body almost stopped breathing.

She looked around desperately, probing with her mind, searching with her eyes. She sensed that no one in the room was projecting with such power. She caught a flash of red, then saw it was her own reflection from a mirror behind a counter which a waitress was wiping with a rag.

The waitress glanced around the room as from long habit, checking the people she was serving. Her eyes swept past Teraija, stopped, and came back, surprise flickering there for a moment. "I didn't see you come in," she said.

When Teraija didn't answer, the waitress gave an almost imperceptible shrug of her shoulders, as if to say that one saw all kinds in a restaurant, and finished wiping the counter.

Teraija felt panic. *The language. What was it?* She thought back to her life 5,000 years ago when she crossed over, leaving a deformed, spastic body behind, to enter the world between. She probed, seeking words, vocabulary, but it was all driven from her mind as the tortured call came again, stronger, nearer.

She recognized that terrible plea which transcended mere words. It was the same as her own had been in the bonds of a body that wouldn't do as she saw others do. When she tried to talk in that faraway life, her tongue flopped in her mouth and saliva ran down her chin as her head lolled ludicrously on her neck. When trying to walk, she never could control the jerking of arms and legs.

Once free of that body, she soared in that other realm while millenniums passed on earth. Others went back, some for good, some for evil, appearing as visions, apparitions, some even as she now stood, actually in a body. But she never understood why, until that compelling call pulled her relentlessly back.

Quickly she glanced around the small coffee shop which looked so strange. It had to be an inn of some kind, for people were eating. But nowhere did she see a wood fire such as she had known, nor the oil lamps, the

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rough planks of the floor. But there was no mistaking the smell of cooking food that came pleasantly to her nostrils.

Again she sniffed the aromas with sensuous delight, her mouth watering in anticipation of how good food would taste.

But she couldn't just stand there. Already others were casting covert glances her way as they ate and drank. She walked toward the counter and looked once again in the mirror, seeing the delicate features of a face with a clear complexion and slanting eyes. Her lithe body was barely five feet tall, yet filled out, its curves accented rather than hidden by the clinging psychodelic red kimono. Several strands of coal-black hair fell across her breasts, outlining them against the red. The rest fell in a glistening cascade down her back.

Teraija sensed the waitress was watching her, even as she talked with a man who had just sat down at the counter.

"Ham 'n eggs," he said, "and hash browns."

"Coffee as usual?"

"Yeah, black," the man answered.

The waitress moved back to the rectangular opening which Teraija now saw led to what had to be a kitchen. "No. 1, hash browns," she called. She poured black liquid into a cup and set it in front of the man.

"What'll you have?" she asked, looking at Teraija.

Teraija struggled with her memory. *What were the words the man had said?*

"Ham 'n eggs," she finally said carefully, struggling to form the unfamiliar words. "And hash browns." The words came out with the coarse inflection the man had used, only in the higher tones of her own voice. She knew immediately she had done something wrong when the waitress looked surprised and the man turned to stare at her. She smiled as if to reassure the waitress and then turned to smile at the man.

The waitress shook her head slightly as she wrote on her pad and went back to the rectangular opening. The man almost knocked his coffee cup over when he reached for it while looking into her beautiful face, a foolish smile covering his own.

Teraija felt a sharp surge of joy. She had seen that look many times before, in that other body, only then she had been a silent, bitter spectator, held in the bonds of her deformed body as she watched beautiful women lure men with a smile or movement of body.

She had that kind of a face now herself, that kind of a beautiful, sensuous body! The joyous realization almost drove the voiceless call from her mind, but it was getting stronger, even as the man spoke in words she didn't understand.

"Japanese, eh?" he said. He put a large hand possessively on her slim wrist. "I'll help you."

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She smiled her thanks just as the door of the cafe opened and a shock wave of distress assaulted her. It came from a man who had once stood tall, but now moved with a shuffling slump, his head down, his eyes on the floor, his hands hanging listlessly at his sides.

Her eyes barely saw his physical body, which once had been strong, handsome, erect, for here was the one whose insistent, pleading call had pulled her through the gate.

He raised his eyes slowly, drawn by the intensity of Teraija's concentration. Their eyes met and his opened wide in astonishment. He stopped, immobile, mouth open in silent recognition of one who understood.

Teraija sat equally unmoving at the counter, drawn into those eyes, like another portal or door, into his mind, his consciousness, into a world she found all too familiar. She felt all the hurt, anguish and bitterness of a soul imprisoned in a body and brain that were like a switchboard with the wires crossed.

Switchboard? Wires? Where had she got those words?

The answer came from him in the twinkling of time it takes neural impulses to flash in the brain. She understood what a switchboard was, the function wires performed, how they were similar in a way to how a brain operated.

Swift agreement surged from her own being into his, and he in turn recognized the imprisonment she had endured in that other body, millenniums before.

She, in turn, relived the hell on earth of wartime combat, the pain, suffering, noise, death, hunger and cold. She felt the nights without sleep, of growing anger turning into blood lust to kill, kill, kill, until the human nervous system could stand no more and shorted out. He had escaped death or wounds, only to suffer a more-tortured fate.

Shell-shocked was how people described it. But Teraija, once imprisoned herself, recognized it for what it really was, a brilliant mind, a sensitive spirit, hopelessly imprisoned.

"I can help. We can uncross the wires," she flashed to him, her meaning instantly understood without the need for spoken words or knowledge of language. She began probing deeper, searching gently as he stood unmoving, swaying slightly, his hands slack at his sides, his mouth open.

Neither of them heard the cry of the waitress. "Oh, God. Old Ed's having another fit. Catch him before he falls. I'll call the ambulance." She hurried to the phone as the man beside Teraija rushed to Ed and took him by the arm.

"Steady, old fella," he said. "Take it easy. We've got the ambulance on the way. Just sit down here." He pulled out a chair and eased Ed into it.

Teraija felt their connection weakening as the man led Ed to the chair.

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She sensed long habits of other "seizures" taking over in his mind, dulling the intense rapport they had felt for a few moments.

"No, no!" she called out, only it came out "Zong, zong," the words of her long-dead language. "Leave him alone," she pleaded, only those words were even more unintelligible and only added to the confusion in the cafe.

"He carries pills for that," the waitress said, coming around from behind the counter. She reached into Ed's pocket and brought out a small bottle.

"Here, give me that glass of water and we'll get one of these down him to hold him until the boys get here with the ambulance."

Teraija's eyes saw the waitress take one of the small pills from the bottle and start to put it in Ed's mouth while in her mind, from Ed's own memories, she saw the deadening effect of the pills. As the waitress tipped the glass to his lips, she saw the state of nothingness the pills would bring.

"Zong, zong, zong," she cried, springing from the stool and knocking the waitress away from Ed. The pills scattered across the room and the glass crashed to the floor. She took one of Ed's hands in hers, seeking closer rapport once again, and was jolted by the anguish that struck her like a bolt of lightning at such close range. The physical contact had magnified the impulses.

She saw neural paths of pain worn deep in his brain from much use, like rugged rocky canyons down which he trod like a prisoner day after day. Other, brighter paths were long unused, like sylvan glades overgrown with brambles and weeds.

She probed the rocky paths and saw they led to the nothingness, almost the euphoria of release, of sedatives and drugs. She flashed the thought to him that she could help him up out of the tortuous rocky canyons into the paths of freedom, that together they could break the long-ingrained repeating pattern of pain and seizure, followed by the blank nothing of drugs.

He understood and reached out, mentally struggling to break out of the canyons, when their intense rapport was suddenly broken. She felt strong arms pulling her away, heard as from another universe, a harsh voice asking, "What the hell did you do that for?"

She was still in contact, but the closeness was gone as people worked to comfort Ed, who was slumped in the chair, sweat rolling down his face.

Dimly she heard the wail of a siren and then saw two strong men hurry in to the room and take command. Bits of conversation filtered through to her conscious mind.

"Old Ed had another fit...yeah, we've had him before...she did it... knocked it right out of my hand... some foreigner...you guys can handle it now...Vets administration picks up the tab...a shot or two and he'll be okay...lucky we were close by..."

Helplessly Teraija watched them

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lead Ed out the door and into a vehicle with flashing lights. Frantically she sought Ed's mind and was aghast at his memories of a hospital with attendants administering shots, days of hazy memories, then release once more to his tiny apartment.

"Been seeing things again, Ed?" one of the attendants said, more as a statement than a question.

Horrified, Teraija saw that Ed, out of long habit, already was looking forward to the relief of oblivion and was beginning to believe their brief touching of spirits and minds was another of the nightmares that periodically wracked him.

She sensed that if she lost contact now, she would never be able to reach him again, for the experience would only leave another scar on his vulnerable soul, and future contact would be impossible.

She ran into the street just as the door to the ambulance slammed shut and it pulled away. *"No, No. I'm real. I can help!"* she called out to him with her mind, fighting to keep the tenuous contact from breaking. She stopped, concentrated all her psychic energies like a single ray of thought at the ambulance that was picking up speed.

His thought flashed back at her with the intensity of a mental laser beam. It was as of a man wakening from a nightmare. *He knew. He understood!* She almost wept with relief. She also sensed that he understood what was about to happen, that he was heading once more to oblivion. The agony of the original summons was magnified now, as of a man who has glimpsed paradise only to see it slipping from his grasp.

Teraija ran after the ambulance, her mind, her attention far ahead. A blaring horn and screeching tires brought her harshly back to her physical body. Another of those vehicles had nearly run into her.

She looked wildly around, saw no others coming, so raced on across the street, the red silk of her kimono streaming out behind. She reached out, fighting to keep the connection from severing as it grew steadily weaker.

Her body soon forced her to stop. She was out of breath, her legs refusing to run any more. Desperately she looked at the passing cars, then stepped into the street, waving at them, calling out in her own language, "Help, help! I must follow him!"

A car pulled over and stopped. A man reached over and opened the door. "Hop in," he said.

"Where to, honey?" he asked, his eyes blatant in their examination of her face and body.

She pointed in the direction which the ambulance had gone, a plea on her face. "I don't speak your language," she said in her own tongue.

The man's eyes opened slightly in surprise, then narrowed in thought. He reached across her, where the door was still open. "We better close that, beautiful."

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His arm rubbed heavily across her breasts as he closed the door. She gasped, completely unprepared for the automatic response of her body to erotic physical contact. Her mind was far ahead, seeking to keep contact with Ed.

"Like that, honey?" he asked, obviously mistaking her shock for pleasure. He patted her knee. "Don't worry, baby, we'll get there." His hand lingered on her knee, then slid up along the inside of her thigh before he removed it to shift the car into drive.

The physical sensation was stronger than she had ever believed it could be, even as his action repelled her. She sought his mind and recoiled from the jumble of passions, memories, warped dreams. She saw other women picked up in his car, assaulted, strangled and left in remote wooded areas. She saw herself in his mind, her clothing torn from her body, his hunger, his longing, his desperate consuming desire vented on her.

She tore her mind out of the morass and motioned with her hand in the direction they were going and nodded her head. She would worry about him later. She had to keep up with Ed. She reached out, concentrating, joining once again with Ed, then felt despair as other images welled up in his mind. She saw other visits to the hospital, attendants giving him shots: Ed slipping off into a haze of forgetfulness, not caring.

The pattern was taking hold, forcing even her thoughts from his mind. She sensed the ambulance had stopped, that the car in which she was riding was getting nearer. With part of her mind she probed the mind of her driver and saw he was thinking of a heavily wooded spot close to the hospital.

She shut her eyes, forced all else from her mind and called to Ed, *"I'll help. I'm with you."*

A surge of hope came back, and she felt Ed struggling, fighting to climb out of the narrow, rocky neural paths that were leading him once again to the forgetfulness of heavy sedation.

"How, how, how?" came back the plea. *""Show me how."*

"I can't. You must do it yourself." She projected thoughts of herself on the rim of a canyon, reaching down, but he had to make the first move, had to struggle up those steep sides to where she could reach him.

She concentrated and suddenly she was in his mind. They were as one mind in two places. Together they struggled hand-in-hand up out of the old deep paths, rutted with years of agony, hurt and imprisonment. They shared glorious hope as the weed-choked meadows became more open, as they neared the bright promise that lay ahead.

Then Ed faltered. Through his physical eyes she saw he was inside the hospital and attendants were taking over from the men in the ambulance. Old memories of blessed relief flooded

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his mind and beckoned him to give in, to follow; but she saw the step in that direction would be back into the old rocky canyons.

"Almost, just a little more," she pleaded. But as his foot paused over the path back to oblivion, she was jolted from her own concentration. The car in which she was riding had stopped, and the man was clutching her shoulders with one hand while with his other he was frantically tearing the red silk fabric.

Opening her eyes, she saw saliva at the corners of his mouth as he bent close. She struggled, but his arms were as steel. She heard the fabric rip as he pulled her from the car onto the ground.

"Zong, zong, zong!" she cried in her own language, repelled at the thought of her magnificent body being mauled, desecrated. She scratched, kicked and fought, but nothing stopped him. A great cry of agony escaped her lips as she thought of that other life in her cramped, deformed body, and now this body was going to be mauled, damaged, its highest function made a thing of sick, raw passion.

In desperation she left Ed, sending a bolt of mental energy into her attacker's mind. He paused in his pawings, a blank look on his face. *"I can stop him!"* Teraija realized joyously. With the same power that helped Ed, she could make this maniac stop.

Her joy was short, for even as she started to extricate herself from his now clumsy grasp, she heard Ed's startled call, *"Where are you? Don't leave! I can't do it alone!*

Teraija reached out to Ed while keeping her attacker at bay, then realized part wouldn't be enough. It was like trying to carry on two conversations at once. With more time she could have done it without total concentration. She had to give Ed everything or he would slip back into the old canyons, never to climb out. That also meant she would have to release her attacker to finish what he had started.

She glanced at her lithe, beautiful body, exposed now in nakedness, scratched from his frantic hands. She closed her eyes as if bidding farewell to a life that could have been and plunged completely back into Ed's mind.

As from a distance, she felt the attack begin once more, felt the rapist's brutal hands bruising, his teeth biting. Ignoring that, she saw through Ed's eyes that the attendants were chatting casually, joking, while one filled a needle.

"I can't stop them!" Ed's frightened mind called.

"You can."

"I'm slipping. They're going to do it!"

"Try once more!" she urged, sending thoughts of the hope that lay beyond the rutted canyons where he had suffered for so long. *"You're almost there."*

They hung in the balance for long moments as in a dream she felt the

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rapist's passion spend itself only to have his hands close about her slender throat.

"You're getting weaker," Ed called in panic. *"Don't leave now."*

"You have to do it yourself," she called weakly as she felt her physical life being snuffed out by choking hands. *"I...can't...hold on...any longer...."*

Her agony carried through to him and in surprise he looked back along the two-way path their union had become. Intent as he was on his own personal battle, he had never looked back to the other half of what had become one mind.

As with her eyes he saw the distorted face of the attacker bending over her, the image growing fainter as consciousness left her.

The sight was like a shot of mental adrenalin. He forgot his doubts and leaped over the final yawning chasm of the old neural canyons. At the same time he gave an angry shout with his physical vocal chords and leaped from the table where he had been waiting passively.

He knocked the needle from the startled attendant and bolted through the door, physical adrenalin pouring through his body. He raced down long-familiar corridors of the hospital. Running out the door, he homed in on the faint glimmer of Teraija's mind. The direction told him it was a heavily wooded section near the hospital. He crashed through the thick brush, ignoring the brambles that tore at his clothing, his body.

He saw the glint of sun on the car first, then exploded into the small clearing where Teraija lay, the hands of the rapist on her throat.

He reached out mentally, catching a faint response from her mind. *"Don't leave!"* he called, but got no answer. He was so intent on her fading consciousness, he barely noticed the rapist leap to his feet and flee. Ed started to follow, then stopped as Teraija's mind rallied for a moment. In that brief instant both realized he was whole. She sent out a wave of happiness, then nothing.

Teraija fled back to the gate, the *torii*, seeking the other realm where she had roamed for 5,000 years. She yearned for that freedom of memory, for escape from the trauma of the attack she had suffered. But it was different now. She was disoriented, confused. As from a distance, she looked back and saw Ed pick up her battered, nude body, saw tears running down his face as he bent close to her. She knew she should not feel it, but his lips were on hers, breath was being pumped into her lungs.

Lungs? She had no lungs in this other realm. Yet the pressure grew stronger. Then physical consciousness crashed back and she opened her physical eyes. Ed's mouth was to her mouth and he was breathing rhythmically in-

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to her lungs. She raised a hand and touched his arm. He looked up and she drew a ragged breath of her own.

Her body ached, her mind was drained. She closed her eyes to forget the trauma of the rapist's raw, sick passion. She sought that other realm, willing herself back into the hazy nothingness of physical death, only to feel the gentle probes of his mind searching, making tender contact, calling her back.

That tender call was more powerful than the earlier shouted call of desperation which had first drawn her into the physical world. But the residual poison of the attacker's sickness clouded her mind. She wanted out of this body, just as she had wanted out of the other one, millenniums before.

"You don't understand what that did to me," she said, her agony projecting into his mind. *"I'm unclean. Soiled."*

She hovered between two worlds, wanting release once more, release from physical pain but even more from spiritual agony.

"Stay with me," he demanded.

"I can't," she murmured in his mind.

"That's what I said," he shot back, the thought insistent, almost angry, yet tempered by overtones of laughter at a shared joke. For their roles now were reversed. *"You have some old rocky canyons in your own mind."*

"No, no," she shouted back, even as she realized he was right.

"They're from that other life 5,000 years ago," came his insistent, unyielding thought. *"And you're starting to dig some new ones."*

She fought against his reasoning, against the shield she threw up in her own consciousness millenniums ago and had strengthened in the 5,000 years of roaming, seeking to forget.

Then in a bright moment of revelation she understood why his first anguished call had been so powerful. It had echoed her own deepest feelings, giving it the power of reinforcement which pulled her through into the physical world.

She saw the trauma of the attack etching new paths in her mind, which in turn would become more canyons of despair, if she gave in.

"I'm with you, I'll help," he said, echoing the words she had spoken in his mind only minutes earlier.

"How? Show me." She in turn repeated his plea as she fought the new memories of the attack as well as those 5,000-year-old nightmares she had long sought to suppress, to forget, even as she lived in them.

She felt his concentration as he struggled with mental powers so new to him. He was awkward, yet she sensed a towering strength that would make him a giant among men. Leaning on his new-found strength, she turned her own back on the neural paths of trauma, both old and new.

She opened her eyes, looked into his and smiled. ☙

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J. W. Schutz contributed to F&SF some years ago and makes a welcome return with this short and suspenseful sf story. Since his last story here, Mr. Schutz "retired from the diplomatic service, ran a student hostel and taught school in Pakistan for a year. I then strolled the rest of the way around the world, playing golf in Katmandu, New Delhi, Tokyo and Bali for another year. Settled down in France to raise wine grapes, but left last year when life got too expensive for the soft dollar."

Lebenstraum

BY

J. W. SHUTZ

"You all right, Arthur?"

The anxious feminine voice echoed in Arthur Bok's helmet, and with a frown he turned down the volume with a right-to-left movement of his chin against the collar ring of his spacesuit. There was the background of a blue-grass music tape behind the voice, a tape he had endured far, far too many times.

"Yes, thanks, Anne." With an effort Bok kept his voice neutral, although it seemed to him that this must be the thousandth time she had asked him the same question. As ship's psychiatrist, he, of all people, must not give way to irritation. The voyage was in its second year, and the six crew members — three men and three women — must manage not to get on each other's nerves for another four.

"Just checking," Anne Botticek said. "You've been quiet for a long time."

"Thanks. I'll be in shortly. Have some hot coffee ready for me, will you? My hands are getting cold."

"Better be careful. How long now?"

"Another ten minutes. I'm getting in the last of the plates."

"Coffee in ten minutes. Right!" and the girl was off the air.

Bok smiled. Odd, to be measuring time in minutes when surrounded by almost tangible eternity. This was his fifteenth EVA, but it excited him still. Before shifting his position he faced the sun—much smaller than a sun should be, but burning with a savage fury — and then turned directly away from it to locate Neptune, which was beginning to be a perceptible disk even to the naked eye. It was a relief to get out of the confines of the ship and feel thoroughly alone for a while. He sigh-

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ed and slowly pulled himself along a handrail toward the last of the particle collector plates, snapping a safety line to a lug provided for the purpose before unfastening the one behind him.

Quickly he drew his feet under him and, using the safety line to provide tension, stood up on the ship's outer surface, straddling the collector plate in its recess in the hull. Ten minutes, he had said. That was cutting it a bit fine, but if he didn't make it in that time, he would again hear Anne's irritating, "You all right, Arthur?"

He looked down at the plate, which seemed to be set a little deeper in the hull than its predecessors. Rapidly, without bothering to set a second tether, he pulled a thin plastic sheet across the surface of the plate. The pressure differential inside the ship would seal it hermetically. Then, without noticing that his feet were not exactly at right angles to the hull, he grasped the handle which should pull the plate out of its snap socket.

The plate refused to come away with the first tug. With one hand he took a grip on the safety tether and with the other gave a sharp yank. With terrifying slowness and inexorability his feet slid from under him along the smooth hull. Instinctively he protected the face plate of his helmet with his arms. Weightless or not, inertia was not canceled in space, and even a trivial blow could be fatal. He had plenty of time to wonder what would happen this time. With luck, a bruise or two.

A moment later his hip came in contact with the hull, and he felt rather than heard a crackling at the point of collision. At the same instant the carrier hum of his communicator cut out. The loss of communication suddenly changed from being a blessed relief to a serious matter. He scrambled hurriedly to his feet.

Far too hurriedly. The single tether connecting him with the ship came taut with a sharp jerk, vibrated for a second, and then was still. He pulled on it to give his feet purchase on the hull, and to his horror it came away in his hand, the broken end of the lug to which it had been fastened striking his thigh with a stinging impact. He was slowly drifting away from the ship.

"Mayday! Mayday!" The shout was automatic, almost a scream. With a huge effort he forced his voice to a normal level and carefully moved his chin left to right on the helmet vernier of the comset. There was no corresponding hiss from the receiver plug in his left ear. Forlornly hoping that it was only the receiving circuit that had been damaged by his fall, he repeated carefully and distinctly, "Bok calling Trident. Bok calling Trident. Am drifting away from the ship. Repeat. Am drifting away. Get a line to me quickly."

He stopped and waited for some sign from the ship. There was nothing; no opening airlock, no sound in his earpiece. Perhaps he should explain more fully and ask for a sign.

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"Trident! Do you hear me?" he began again, his voice rising in spite of himself. "Safety line broke. My receiver's out. Repeat. Receiver out. Flash the ship's lights if you hear me. Flash lights. But for Christ's sake, hurry with that line before I drift out of reach."

Still no response. In that instant he'd have given the sight of an eye to hear Anne Botticek's voice again.

Nothing.

In the meantime the gap between himself and the ship was widening inexorably. At the same time his body was slowly turning away. He had another moment of panic. What if he were turned completely away from the ship when a line was thrown and he couldn't see to catch it? He struggled frantically to stop his spin, remembering finally that he could influence the turning rate by extending his arms and legs. He did so, but his body continued to turn, although more slowly. Finally there was nothing he could do to keep the ship from drifting out of his line of sight. He brought his arms and legs together to increase the rate of turning until he could see the ship again from the other side of his helmet. The maneuver seemed to take hours — days.

He had told Anne he would return to the airlock in ten minutes. Assuming that his transmitter was also smashed, would he drift out of range of the Trident's longest available casting line before ten minutes had passed? It seemed all too probable. When they missed him — and they'd allow a minute or two over the ten — it would take time for someone to suit up before the lock could be opened. Give it another five minutes for that. Say seventeen minutes in all. Most of that must have passed already, and he was only five or six meters from the side of the ship. He had a good chance, even if it took four or five minutes longer than he'd estimated. He held his wrist chrono close to his helmet to check the time, but this far from the soft glow of the hull lights he could not read it. He swore. Was there some other way to estimate the time since the moment when the tether had snapped?

There was. He had made one and a half complete turns. He would count pulse beats while he made another turn, moving his arms and legs in the same fashion. To his astonishment, the endless-seeming turn took only two minutes and ten seconds. He was now, at a rough guess, ten meters from the ship and roughly four and a half minutes had passed. In seventeen minutes he would be at least thirty-five meters from the Trident. Was there a line that long on board? He couldn't remember.

Another unhappy thought occurred to him. At a distance of thirty meters or more, he would be a small black object against the velvet blackness of space. He could only be seen if he should happen to occult a star while someone was looking in the right direction. A search light would

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pick him out, of course, but turning it on the right spot would again be a matter of luck. It was then that he noticed that, in addition to rotating, his body was also tumbling. The tumbling was slower than his rotation, but in a few more minutes the top of his helmet would be toward the ship. No chance of seeing a line if one could be accurately thrown or directed so far.

Carefully he counted the beats of his pulse with the artery of his neck pressed painfully against the sealer ring of his helmet. At twleve minutes, and on his sixth turn, the ship's softly lighted hull slowly disappeared above the upper rim of his faceplate. Now he wouldn't know if the lights were flashed, there being no diffusion of light in space. From now on he could depend only upon his own resources and courage to pass the time until he was rescued.

If he were.

There were many speculations — even legends — of what might happen to a man who was lost alone in space. It was believed that the victim would go mad if his life-support system kept him alive for more than a day or two. Others maintained that, before allowing this to happen, even the most courageous man would crack his helmet seal and die quickly. The trouble with these stories was that few men had ever, so far as it was known, faced such a fate, and none had been recovered, either dead or alive, to substantiate one claim or the other.

"Unless I'm found," Bok told himself, "I won't be able to settle the question either!"

During this grim speculation he lost track of the number of pulse beats, and now that he could no longer see the ship, the number of rotations was impossible to count in any case. He would have to leave his rescue—if it were to occur—up to his shipmates. They would try, of course. They were a good bunch. He felt a huge surge of affection for each of them. Perhaps he would marry Kinza Phillips, the crew's physicist, when he got back!

The thought suddenly chilled him. When I get back! More likely it should be, IF I get back. Mustn't think this kind of thoughts. Try to figure out some way of attracting attention from the ship.

With the most intense concentration he had ever used in his life, Bok tried to find some way to give himself a better chance for survival.

Nothing. He would simply have to wait for rescue.

He tried again to estimate the passage of time. Had he been racking his brains for minutes only? Or was it hours? The thought of time in relation to his possible distance now from the Trident brought him to the consideration of time in relation to life-support system. His back-pack was "guaranteed" to provide thirty hours of extravehicular activity—or, as in this case, inactivity. Thirty hours!

Thirty hours in which to be rescued

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by the crew who by now had no idea where to look in a sphere of hard-vacuum blackness that was already enormous and growing larger, minute by minute. As those minutes passed, his chance of being found and brought back to the relative safety of the ship was rapidly approaching zero.

Zero. Zero equalled Death.

The chill he had felt at the possibility of not marrying Kinza was as nothing to the terror that suddenly gripped him now, a blind panic in which he thrashed his arms and legs about wildly and uselessly.

When his insane gyrations had increased his metabolism until the sound of his breathing was roaring thunderously in his own ears, he brought himself up sharply. He couldn't afford to waste his precious oxygen in this childish fashion. He was going to die. Of course he was. Every man died. He had known that death was a possibility when he had accepted becoming one of the Trident's crew. It was a risk he had taken gladly at the time. To be one of those who extended man's conquest this deeply into space had seemed worthy of any sacrifice. But had he really thought about actual death at the time? Given a mere possibility, who ever does? But he would have to think about it now. Sanely, if he could.

This would be a unique way to die, but why should he be chosen to suffer it? This was a childish thought too. Men had died in every conceivable way and had probably asked themselves the same question, and then faced their end as manfully as they were able. As a trained psychologist, why shouldn't he apply his abilities for alleviating the problems of others for meeting his own end as courageously as any man?

Of course it was wickedly difficult to know that your life was measured in hours and to know their number. But others had gone through this too. Many a man condemned to the scaffold or the guillotine had actually swaggered to meet his executioners. Why shouldn't he?

All right. He had thirty hours to live. He would be a fool to spend them in fear—to die again and again, minute by minute. Those thirty hours were to be lived!

How should he live them? The temptation was strong to try to remember the myriad happy experiences and bright hours of his past life. That was a waste — stale personal history, trivial at best.

Prayer then? With little or no religious background, he found he had no faith in it. Prayer had never permitted the unwilling-to-die to live forever. Pray for forgiveness? No. He would be forgiven his sins against others when those others had forgotten. Nothing would change that.

It not prayer or memories—what? The only alternative was to live these thirty hours as though they were all there had ever been. Like the short summer life of a mayfly.

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But how could a man do that? He stilled his breathing and let his pulse run down to normal while he considered the problem. The stars wheeled slowly before his faceplate and he stared at them blindly. It seemed that the stars were wheeling and he was still. Half consciously he corrected his viewpoint and now he was turning and the stars were still. The effect was rather like looking at a picture of the craters on the moon and seeing them now as depressions, now as bulging domes. He had often done that.

But he was wasting time. Time more precious than any he had ever lived before. Impatiently he closed his eyes, but his chain of thought was broken. Fear was trying to creep in again. Fiercely he concentrated on the thing that came most easily to mind; his early college training in psychology. He remembered a lecture in which an early experiment was performed on a moronic subject. When the man's eyes were blindfolded and his ears plugged with cotton, he fell asleep instantly. This was virtually Bok's own situation now. Sight and sound were cut off and, in weightlessness, even contact with his spacesuit and inner clothing was either nonexistent or tenuous. But he, Arthur Bok, was no moron. He would not waste his microscopically short life in sleep either.

Or would he?

He remembered other simple experiments now, having to do with dreaming. A sleepy subject was allowed to sit in a chair, holding a bell. The object was to determine the duration of dreams (this was before REM's—rapid eye movements—had been discovered). It was found that the subject could dream dreams that apparently covered long periods—hours, and sometimes days or weeks—between the moment when the bell fell from his hands and its noisy fall awakened him.

He recalled, too, recent techniques for inducing certain definite dreams, and cases where the subject had difficulty in distinguishing dreams from reality. Were not both in the mind?

Suddenly he had it! He could extend his "life" almost indefinitely in dreams and, with the help of the modern techniques which he had mastered for application to others, he could dream approximately what he wanted to.

Should he dream an extension of his present life? No. The certainty of its shortness would interfere with the evocative technique. He closed his eyes almost as if they would break if not handled carefully. Darkness more complete than anything he had ever experienced followed at once, and he felt the stirrings of panic again.

What if he should miss seeing the ship when his body was again facing it? Helplessly he found himself open-eyed, scanning the stars, trying to find the Trident. He failed to recognize it when at last he saw it. The small, lighted observation ports could themselves be mistaken for stars. It was on-

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ly when one of the lights blinked when a crew member passed in front of it that he knew it for what it was.

So impossibly far away! Not even the outline of the hull could be distinguished, and the tiny ports were so close together that the ship could only be peopled with microscopic beings. Comparing his own size with the apparent size of the ship, he felt the last of hope slip from him. Surely now he could never be found in time. He felt tears gather in his eyes and closed them, feeling the wetness spread over his eyelids, forehead and cheeks, then evaporate icily in the softly moving air within his suit. Why had he ever become an astronaut? As a child he had wanted to be a musician. God, how much better off he would have been! Grimly he held his eyes firmly shut. Now dreams were his only refuge.

Carefully he separated his body from all contact with the fabric of the spacesuit. Without sight, sound, touch, or any of the stimuli of the senses to guide him, he was now in a void more terrible even than the cruel emptiness of surrounding space.

The first dream came almost at once.

He was a little boy named—officially—Arthur Bok. The grown-ups called him "Cubby" and he hated that. He wanted them to call him "King," which was a good nickname to go with his real first name, but of course they wouldn't. He was sitting on the bank of a stream on a warm spring morning, watching with fascination as his Uncle Bill separated the bark from a straight willow twig by tapping it all around with the handle of his big penknife, then slipped the sheath of bark off the slippery white stem and carved the twig in a miraculous manner so that when the bark was carefully replaced the whole became a small whistle to delight a little boy's heart. Uncle Bill was one of the nicer grown-ups.

"King" Arthur spent the morning after that wandering alone in the warm moist woods, picking "Dutchman's britches," snow flowers, and early violets, and trying to beguile the birds chattering overhead with his whistle.

At lunch he ate vastly of all of the things boys like, finishing with a shortcake made with tiny wild strawberries, pungent and tart-sweet on the tongue.

In the afternoon he helped his father and Uncle Bill to weed an asparagus bed, listening wisely when the two men talked of weather and markets, daring to blow his whistle only when they were silent.

All too quickly it was evening and he watched wistfully as Uncle Bill milked Bessie in the hot, dusty shed, redolent with the mixed friendly odors of the cow, warm milk, and winter-stored hay. The milk made a rhythmic hissing as it arrowed into the pail between his uncle's knees. The whistle was a saliva-dampened ruin in the boy's small fingers.

"Uncle Bill, can you make a willow

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stick into a whistle that plays real tunes?"

"Not with a willow twig, Cubby, but it can be done. A whistle like that's called a flute."

"Could you make me a flute?"

"I could buy you a real, store-made one if you'd be good for a whole week and go to bed nights without fussing at your mother."

At bedtime Arthur went off without a protesting word. His mother and Uncle Bill grinned at each other and he knew why, but he didn't care. He lay for a long time between the crisply starched sheets that were cold at first but became warm if you lay still. He looked at the stars through his window and thought of his flute. Big stars—hard-looking ones. For some reason he hated stars.

And then he was no longer a little boy, but an astronaut who had never been called Cubby, and he had only a few more hours to live. And he knew why he hated stars.

Still, he had tricked the damn stars and had lived a whole extra day in spite of them. He could do more. He must do more! Firmly he closed his eyes again, relaxed his fear-tensed body, controlled his breathing, and went through the mental discipline that would induce the dream.

It was the Bok boy's sixteenth birthday and he had played for the first time as soloist in the high-school band concert. There was a party for him at home, with some of his friends in the band invited, and some adults too. Among the latter was the bandmaster (mathematics teacher on weekdays), whom Arthur overheard telling his mother, "The boy has real talent. You should get him a far better teacher. Marcotti's one of the best, and I wouldn't be surprised if he could get Arthur a music scholarship by the time he's ready for college."

It was that evening when he kissed Annaliese for the first time. It was an awkward performance, but Annaliese was kind about it and even gave him a hasty supplementary peck in the hall when they parted at the party's end.

By the time the week was over, he had composed a scrap of music for Annaliese. This was an awkward performance too, but there was something sweetly haunting about it and it became "their" tune. Within a month the whole school was whistling it and it was theirs no longer. Arthur promised Annaliese another melody which, this time, they would keep secret.

When the composition was finished, he played it for her on his new silver flute at sunset in the crabapple orchard behind her house. The melody was not technically perfect, but there was such happiness in it that the girl's eyes were filled with tears. The light caught and scattered in her midnight-dark pupils and became stars.

* * *

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Stars! Arthur Bok turned his head in his helmet and cursed them individually, then grinned. "I'm beating you, damn you. I've lived—lived, you hear me!—six weeks, maybe more, on thirty hours of air." He slept again, still more quickly this time.

When Arthur graduated from Julliard, he and Annaliese were married. His first concert tour began the year the baby was born.

They called the baby Amadee. She was a lovely child but suffered from asthma, and Arthur spent much time teaching her to control her breathing.

As time went on, he had fewer and fewer dreams about being in a void of stars, and those dreams became shorter and shorter. They still gave him a nameless feeling of dread, but as his hair turned from iron-grey to white, he was able to dismiss them.

With the advancing years a feeling of triumph grew in his spirit which was reflected in his compositions. His concert tours became less frequent and shorter, however. A time came when he was afflicted with the same asthma which had caused so much suffering to little Amadee—now a grown woman with children of her own.

He continued to play, however, stilling the laboring of his heart with an effort of will, and getting through his concerts somehow, using the magnificent control of breathing that the flute had taught him.

Until the day when he fainted in his dressing room after a particularly demanding performance.

They took him home in an ambulance over his protests, and his doctor, a friend he had known for sixty years, told him brutally, "Arthur, you can't keep this up any longer. You're an old man whether you admit it or not, and your heart simply won't take it. You should think seriously about retiring."

The following morning Bok examined his face in his shaving mirror. What he saw was not encouraging: hair white and pitifully thin, mouth and chin still firm, but deep dark circles under his eyes, and folds of grey papery skin hanging loosely at his throat.

"Doc's right," he told his reflection. "You're an old man, Arthur. I promise you one more concert in New York; then we'll tell the public farewell and spend our declining years listening to Amadee's boy playing the saxophone — God help us!"

The night before the farewell concert, Bok dreamed of stars again, this time gyrating wildly as though someone were shaking the whole sky. He awoke panting and feeling that he had somehow conquered some deep fear.

The concert itself was a truly great triumph. He had played *Requiem for Amadee*, a composition in which joy and sadness were so superbly blended that many of the audience cried unashamedly while others stood smiling in the aisles cheering themselves

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hoarse. Arthur took curtain call after curtain call, but when he reached his dressing room, the lights abruptly went out and were replaced by the dreaded stars—this time with a strong light shining off somewhere toward his feet. He saw his doctor's anxious face for a moment and knew that he was being wheeled carefully into an operating room. He felt strangely light — hardly touching the all-encompassing garment in which they had dressed him. Two vaguely familiar men and three women were gathered around him. Doctors and nurses, he supposed. This transparent shield around his head must be some kind of an oxygen tent. It didn't help much.

Captain Benson leaned over the space-suited figure floating in the inner-lock space of the Trident.

"We'll have to get the suit off him quick. But be careful; he's still breathing. We found him just in time. A few more minutes and he'd been a goner."

Kinza Phillips gasped when the helmet was removed.

"My God," she whispered, "his hair's snow white!"

Bok smiled vaguely at her and murmured something.

"What did he say?" Anne Botticek said.

The second man brushed the women gently aside and applied a stethoscope to Bok's exposed chest. "It sounded like 'Amadee.' I can't hear his heart! Ah. There it is. Seems to be beating only once in eight or ten seconds or so. Give him a whiff of oxygen. I don't know if I dare give him any other stimulant yet."

They labored over him for hours, but Bok's breathing continued to slow, and his heart beat less and less frequently. When it did so, it was with a great pounding surge that seemed as if it must tear itself out of his chest.

Captain Benson had taken over the medical effort, and his body was now drenched with sweat as he plunged a long needle into Bok's chest and pumped adrenalin directly into the laboring heart. There was one great throbbing effort, and the heart paused, then resumed its slow, impossibly spaced beating.

"I can't do anything more for him," Benson said, turning to Kinza Phillips. "How old was he?"

It was Anne Botticek who replied.

"Forty-four, I think."

Bok opened his eyes and there was a ghost of a smile on his lips. "Eighty-seven, nurse," he whispered.

Kinza stifled a sob. "Poor Arthur! Look at you! It could almost be true, you know. God alone knows what horror you've been through, and you still try to cheer us up when...when.... Don't worry, Arthur, we'll get you well again."

Benson was nervously fumbling with a short section of surplus chromed tubing while he stared at Bok's hands. The hands were skeletal and

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there were deep brown "age spots" on their backs. Grey tissuepaper-like skin hung loosely from the arms where the flabby muscles lay over the bones, outlining them clearly.

Bok opened his eyes again and saw the length of metal tubing in Benson's fingers.

"Give me my flute," he said in almost normal tones.

Benson looked puzzled for an instant, then carefully handed the tube to the dying man.

An hour later they re-sealed Arthur Bok in his spacesuit; and just before sending his body out among the slowly wheeling stars for the last time, Benson, for no reason he could account for, slipped the silvery bit of tubing Arthur had called "my flute" into the stiff gloved fingers.

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At this writing, the Winter Olympics are over, Jim Craig is in goal for the Atlanta Flames, the Summer games are threatened with boycott, and the future of the contests seems in doubt. Here is a timely and wild extrapolation of one kind of future for the Olympics, with more than a glint of truth in it.

A Glint of Gold

BY

NICHOLAS V. YERMAKOV

Landry churned through the water with record-breaking speed, leaving a huge wake behind him in the pool as he kept pace with the dolphin in the lane beside him. They reached the far side of the pool together and executed the flip turn, the dolphin brushing the wall with its tail, Landry kicking off with his webbed feet. As they reached the midpoint of the second lap, the dolphin shot ahead.

Redoubling his efforts, Landry undulated like an eel, snapping his body and thrusting forward with renewed strength as the second wind hit. He began to gain on the dolphin, but after the fourth lap, he steadily lost ground. He finished almost a full length of the pool behind. As he touched the wall, the dolphin shot up out of the water, swimming backwards as it stood on its tail, cackling at him.

"Okay, George, okay, don't rub it in," gasped Landry.

George swam over to his side and nuzzled him gently with his snout. Landry draped his hand around the dolphin's back, his webbed fingers closing around the dorsal fin as George pulled him through the water.

"All right, Landry, that will do for now, come on out. You two can play later."

Banyon watched as Landry climbed up out of the pool, the water streaming from his streamlined body. His muscles rippled as he gasped for breath. The team physician began attaching the various biosensors as he stood there, dripping.

"How do you feel?" Banyon asked him.

"Good," gasped Landry. "Really good. I thought I had him for a minute there." His chest heaved. "Damn! I really thought I had him!"

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"What's the verdict?" Banyon asked the doctor.

"I'd say he's ready for the games," the older man replied. "He's in top-notch condition. Blood pressure, respiration, pulse rate, everything is right on the button. He's in better shape now that he was in Munich."

"Munich was Munich," Banyon replied. "Peking is going to be a whole 'nother story. The Chinese have had Jao J'en-Hsi working harder than ever before and he almost cost us the gold in Munich. That race had been too close, as far as I'm concerned. And you can bet the Russians haven't been sitting on their hands, either. According to intelligence, they've got a thirteen-year-old kid who can already beat all of Landry's best times."

"How do you know?" asked Landry.

"Believe me, I know," answered Banyon, laconically. "It cost the CIA three men to find out even that much. They've got that kid under wraps. They wouldn't be going to so much trouble if they didn't really have something."

"Poor kid," said Landry. "I can imagine what he must be going through."

"Hey, none of that stuff!" snapped Banyon. "You start feeling sorry for the opposition and where does that leave you?"

"Second place?"

"You *got* it, sweetheart. I don't want to hear any more of that kind of talk."

"Jawohl, mein Fuhrer."

"Watch your mouth, wiseass. You may be number-one boy now, but, remember, there's plenty more where you came from."

"How can I forget?"

"Just be sure you don't."

One thousand pounds of steel slammed to the floor with a crash. The weight rolled forward, off the vulcanite matting. Six muscular men, each one looking like an anatomical chart, stopped its rolling motion and lifted it, three on either end, replacing the weight back in its proper position. Banyon watched the screen intently as the lifter prepared for his second try at the clean and jerk.

Wallford's looking tired, Banyon thought. The short, massive power lifter looked like a prize bull. He had no neck to speak of, and his shoulders were almost as wide as he was tall. His arms were at least three times the size of Banyon's thighs and his legs were like tree stumps. He moved ponderously, his breathing labored. Sweat covered his entire body so that he gleamed in the bright lights. His flanks were lathered with foam.

Banyon scowled as the lifter closed his eyes, psyching himself for his second attempt. Sitting beside him in the screening room, his giant bulk reclining in the specially built chair, the coach of the power-lifting team eyed Banyon uneasily. The coach had, himself, been an Olympic champion.

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Now, he wouldn't even qualify. Wallford was his protégé and a silver medalist. He had been driving himself with inhuman dedication and the effort was telling on him.

They watched as Wallford bent down to the barbell. The coach watched Banyon. He knew what was about to happen. He was worried about Banyon's reaction.

Wallford clamped his beefy hands around the barbell, moving them about to get a proper grip. When he was satisfied, he remained in the crouched over position, his eyes closed, his breathing steady. His gargantuan chest rose as he inhaled mightly and, with a throat-rending scream, cleaned the weight. One leg shot backward, straight out, as the front leg remained bent. Every muscle in Wallford's body shivered. His face showed the merciless strain. His eyes bulged. With a superhuman effort, he raised himself straight up, rocking slightly, moving his legs to attain his balance.

Banyon sat forward in his chair, watching intently.

Wallford stood still, his legs apart, his arms bent at the elbows, the incredible weight resting on his chest. Tears were streaming from his eyes. He knew he couldn't do it. Tensing, he inhaled again and screamed a second time, but he only managed to raise the barbell a fraction of an inch above his head. He was unable to straighten his arms. They shook with the effort. Wallford refused to give up. His blood vessels stood out in relief. Then, with horrible slowness, he began to list over backwards. With a pathetic groan, he fell. The weight crashed through the floor and remained there, embedded. The six muscular men struggled to free it, but they could not. The screen went black.

The lights came back on. Banyon pursed his lips, thoughtfully. He did not look at the coach.

"What happened?"

"He dislocated his shoulder. With any luck, he'll be ready for the games, but it's going to be touch and go."

"What about Severson?"

The coach shook his head. "Wallford is our only chance to get a thousand. Severson *might* be ready next time around, but he's a cinch to lose this year."

"Yeah, well, that stinks. You're being paid to produce champions, not cripples. Concentrate on the treatments. Increase the dosages of anabolic steroids in his feed. Put him in for some muscular regeneration surgery, and while you're at it, I want more spinal reinforcement, he's a little loose there. Let's see if we can't get his weight up another thirty or forty pounds. He needs the support."

"I'm concerned about his health," the coach said, licking his lips nervously. "To be perfectly frank with you, Mr. Banyon, I don't think his heart can stand the strain."

"If it can't, I'll hold you personally responsible," said Banyon, flatly. "A

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silver medal won't be good enough. Not this year."

"He won't be much good to you if he's dead," the coach replied, his lips drawn tight.

Banyon looked at him for the first time, matching his stare until the larger man looked away. "He's not much good to me now, is he?"

The coach shook his head, his massive shoulders slumping in resignation.

"Do it."

"How's the team shaping up, Mr. Banyon?"

"Not bad, sir, not bad at all. In fact, they're making better progress than I expected. Though, to be perfectly frank with you, I'm a little worried about Wallford."

"Yes, I've been reading the reports. I have his chart here in front of me. His EKG *has* looked better. You think he can handle the treatments?"

"It's a gamble, of course," Banyon replied, referring to his notes, "but if it pays off, we should see him make some fantastic gains. I think he has a slightly better than fifty-percent chance of survival."

"Who else have we got lined up?"

"Severson. He's young and eager, only seventeen, and he's already crowding Wallford. Still, at five-twenty, he's a bit light. Worse comes to worse, we'll pull a bronze, saving us a little face, and write it off as a good try."

"I don't like that, Banyon. The Russians made us look pretty bad in Munich. Alexandrov swore he was going to break a thousand in Peking. I'm under a lot of pressure, you know."

"I'm doing everything I can, sir."

"Yes, well, all right. We'll cross our fingers and hope for the best. How's Landry coming along? I'm a bit disturbed about all the attention he's getting in the press. I don't want him getting overconfident, just because he swept the field last time."

"You needn't worry about Landry, sir. When they came at him waving money, for all those endorsements and all the other crap, all it took was for me to tell him he would lose his amateur standing, and that was the end of that. All he cares about is swimming. Nothing else means anything to him. He'll do just fine."

"I don't know. I've just received some disturbing news. About that Russian boy."

"Oh?"

"Remember those rumors we heard, a few years ago, about their achieving a new strain? Well, they weren't rumors. It's confirmed. This kid's the first of the batch. We almost got a photograph, but, unfortunately, our man was caught and, well, you know how these things are...."

"Tough break."

"Yes, it was, rather. I wanted that photograph. We're still trying. I'd like to get some footage. According to my information, there's a possibility that

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we may be able to have the kid disqualified."

"On what grounds?"

"On the grounds that he's inhuman."

Banyon exhaled noisily. "Jesus. That's one kettle of fish I wouldn't want to open, if you'll pardon the pun. We try that and it'll really hit the fan. Especially after they've just redefined the standards."

"I'm going to do what I have to do, Banyon. If it upsets a few applecarts, well, so be it. You just see that you do what you have to do."

"You can count on me, sir."

"I hope so, Banyon, I hope so. For your sake."

Landry's wide, specially made shoes made slapping sounds on the floor as he walked, slightly pigeon-toed. He spotted Tom Wallford sitting at his training table and set his tray down beside him.

"Hello, Tom. I looked for you on the tour before, but I didn't see you. You okay?"

"I couldn't go," replied the power lifter, breathing heavily. Before him, the table was crowded with his meal. It consisted of forty-seven scrambled eggs, six cartons of orange juice, a gallon of his special protein drink, five Porterhouse steaks, (medium rare), a bowl of vegetarian beans, stone-ground wheat bread with peanut butter (an entire loaf), a huge bowl of mixed salad greens and carrots, a smaller bowl of radishes, wild rice with shrimp, a broiled bluefish, and several bottles of food supplements.

He ate with deliberate slowness, masticating with a bovine placidity. His movements were sluggish and he was perspiring heavily. He emitted a vaguely barn-like odor.

"I hadda train. (pant, pant) I really wanted t' go, too. (pant, pant) I've never seen Peking. (pant) What was it like?"

"Cheer up," grinned Landry, putting his arm on the giant's back. There was no way he could possibly put his arm *around* him. "You didn't miss much, really. I think we were more the tourist attraction. People massed around us everywhere, although the security was pretty tight."

"Didja see the (pant, pant) Forbidden City? (pant, pant) I've seen only the (pant, pant) pictures."

"Well, yeah, but only briefly, you know? They hustled us in, took some footage, hustled us out, the usual rush. We're only supposed to act like it's all fun. The winning is the thing."

"Urp! Excuse me. (pant) The coach says that I have t' win. (pant, pant) It's really got me worried. (pant) Igor looks fantastic, did ya see him? (pant, pant) He's as big as a house. (pant, pant) He's gonna be real hard ta beat."

"Positive mental attitude, Tom. Positive mental attitude. You've got to win it in your mind, first, remember that. You'll do it, don't you worry."

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"I gotta. (pant, pant) This is gonna be my last time. (pant) I just can't take it anymore, you know. (pant, pant) It's getting so that I can hardly move. I don't know how Igor does it. (pant, pant) My father doesn't want t' see me do it anymore. He says I'll die if I don't stop."

Landry didn't have anything to say to that. He played with his food, absently.

"Brian?"

"Yeah?"

"This Russian kid that everybody's talkin' about. (pant, pant) You seen him, yet)"

"No. Nobody has. He's here, though, you can bet on that. I'm sure they're up to something. I don't ever recall there being an Olympic competitor that no one's even *seen* before. Banyon says they're trying to psych me out, and the coach agrees with him, but I've known Bill too long to let him fool me. He's trained me ever since I was three. I can tell when he's not being straight with me. He's worried."

"He's going ta be the guy ta beat, that's for sure."

"He's just a small fry. Only thirteen. I'll wipe him out. That gold is mine."

Wallford grinned, ruefully. "I really wish I had your confidence."

"Hey, come on, buddy, I don't want to hear talk like that. That isn't like you. So Alexandrov's bigger than you are. So what? Remember, the bigger they are, the harder they fall."

"Maybe so, maybe so." Tom breathed like a giant bellows. "Still, I wouldn't want ta see Igor get hurt. (pant, pant) He's really not a bad guy, ya know."

"Tom, you're beautiful, you know that?"

"Thanks, Brian. You're okay, too. I really mean that."

"Yeah, I know you do. I gotta go. Look, don't eat too much, okay? You'll ruin your appetite for dinner."

Wallford chuckled, a deep, rumbling sound that seemed to come from the bottom of some giant cavern. Landry clapped him on the back and left him to his feast. Tom's father was right. It was time for him to stop.

The boy flopped weakly on the floor, twisting and turning in agony. His somewhat opaque eyes bulged wildly.

"Pozhalosta," he mewled, softly, urgently, "please, please! No more, no more...."

"For God's sake," said Vladimiroff, "he's suffocating!"

The blank-faced man standing over the boy paid him no mind. He watched the child's thrashings with a clinical detachment.

"How is the time?" he asked.

A third man stood nearby with a digital watch in his hand. "One hour and five minutes," he answered.

The boy's movements became weaker and weaker. "Bozhe moi, bozhe moi," whispered Vladimiroff.

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"Please, I beg you. Let him breathe!"

The blank-faced man looked at Vladimiroff a moment, then nodded, curtly. The coach, Vladimiroff, and another member of the team picked the boy up by his arms and legs, raised him up over their heads and carried him to the large tank that stood on the far side of the room. They threw him in with a splash.

Instantly, the boy's gills opened, contracting and expanding quickly, pumping the water through and extracting precious oxygen. He darted about inside the tank, happily, ecstatic at being in his element again.

"Misha, Misha," said Vladimiroff, leaning against the glass wall of the tank, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry...."

"You think I enjoy putting the boy through all this torture?" asked the blank-faced man. "I have no choice, comrade. We have no idea how long he may be away from water. If it is discovered that his lungs are, to all intents and purposes, atrophied, we are lost."

"I curse the day that I set eyes on you, Volkov," the coach said, vehemently. "You have no heart!"

"I cannot afford a heart, comrade," the blank-faced man answered. "They are all together too expensive these days. I will overlook your little outburst because I understand how you must feel towards the boy. But know that now is not the time to become emotional. Too much is at stake."

"Yes, indeed," replied Vladimiroff, "too much."

"Tomorrow, then," said Volkov, "we will try again. We must build up his ability to stay out in the open. It would not do to have him collapse from the platform as they play our national anthem."

As they left, Volkov turned to the third man, the one who had held the watch. "Keep him under close surveillance. We have come too far to take any chances, now."

The third man nodded, grimly.

"Where did you get this?" snapped Banyon.

Wallford stood before him, dwarfing the desk. He shifted his immense weight uneasily from one elephantine foot to the other. "Igor gave it t' me. (pant, pant) We had both done our first lifts of the day," he wheezed, "and as I went up t' shake his hand, he pressed it inta my palm, (pant, pant) all folded up."

"Anyone see this?"

"Oh, no, sir, Mr. Banyon." Tom Wallford gulped for air. "I played it real cool. See, during the last games, in Munich, (pant, pant) they wouldn't let us talk much, ya know. So we got inta the habit (pant, pant) of passing notes like that, so's we could talk in private, sort of."

"You think it's some kind of trick?" Banyon asked the man standing by his side.

"Oh, no, sir," Wallford answered, before the other could reply. "Igor wouldn't do a thing like that." He

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gasped. "I just know he wouldn't. He's a real okay guy."

The man who hadn't had a chance to answer nodded, silently.

"Okay, Tom," Banyon said. "We'll treat this thing as if it's on the level. For now. But if this leaks out, we'll be wading in it hip-deep, you got me?"

Wallford nodded.

"No more note passing. We can't take any chances of them getting wind of this. If Alexandrov catches your eye in some special way, just nod at him. He'll get the meaning. I hope. Damn, if we can pull this off ... That's all, for now, Tom. You can go. And, listen ... as far as you're concerned, you don't know anything. Got that?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Banyon."

"Good. Get me Landry. Tell him nothing. Just say I want to see him right away. Pull him out of practice, anything, I don't care, just get him over here right now."

"Right, Mr. Banyon." He left, waddling, squeezing sideways through the door with difficulty.

Banyon turned to the CIA man standing at his side. "Do you have any idea how we're going to manage this?"

"Not yet," he replied. "But by the time Landry gets here, I'll think of something."

"Vladimiroff wants to defect," said Banyon.

"Holy shit."

"And he wants to bring along Mikhailov."

"The mystery kid. Well, that figures. He must be the reason. They've finally pushed him too far." Landry recalled how warmly the Soviet athletes had spoken of the kindly, paternal Russian.

"Do you have any idea why we haven't seen Mikhailov, yet?" asked Banyon.

"I thought it might be a psych-out ploy, at first. I just dismissed it from my mind. I'm here to win. What does he have, gills or something?"

Banyon stared at him, steadily.

The smile on Landry's face wilted. "Oh, my God. You're kidding."

"I only wish I was, Brian." Banyon almost never called the athletes by their first names. The significance of this did not escape the swimmer. "That's what's going to make it difficult. Mikhailov's not an air breather."

"I think I'd better sit down," said Landry, weakly.

"Go right ahead, son, I don't blame you." He waited until the swimmer sat down in the chair beside the desk. "Pour the kid a drink," said Banyon to the CIA man.

"I'm in training...."

"Medicinal purposes," replied Banyon. "Besides, your training doesn't matter anymore."

"What are you talking about?"

The agent put a brandy snifter in Landry's hand and he tasted it, hesitantly.

"Let's face facts, Brian. I've

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suspected something like this for quite some time now. You don't stand a chance against Mikhailov. Technically speaking, the kid's not even human. But that's beside the point. We're not going to press the issue. Not until he wins, and then we'll use it for a smokescreen. We're going to help them come over. And the coup will be even more embarrassing to the Russians if it's a gold medal winner that defects."

"You're asking me to let him win?" Landry asked, shocked.

"Stubborn, aren't you? Okay, Landry, beat him, then. If you can. But I'll put anything you want on the fact that he's going to leave you in his wake so fast your head is going to spin."

"I'll take that bet."

"Okay, wiseass, you got it. I'll name my stakes after you lose."

"Suits me."

Banyon nodded. "We've taught you well, I'll say that much. Perhaps too well. That remains to be seen. But now that your pride is satisfied, can we get down to details? If we're going to pull this off, we're going to need your help. And *that's* not open to debate."

The careful shielding of Mikhailov and all the attendant speculation resulted in a furor of incredible proportions the first time he made his appearance. France, Great Britain, Japan and Germany (the Federal Republic, naturally) immediately filed protests. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the German Democratic Republic, Cuba, and others filed counterprotests. The United States remained curiously neutral. Through it all, Landry stood out as the most vocal party of them all.

"They can say whatever they want about Mikhailov," he told the press. "I want a chance to race him. I know I can beat him and I want to show the world that I can beat him. So he's got gills? Big deal. You mean the rest of us haven't been genetically engineered? What do you think *these* are?" he asked, holding up his hands.

"But don't you think it's really a question of unfair advantage, Brian?" a celebrated American announcer asked him. "This situation brings to mind the gender scandals of the twentieth century, and with the same participants involved, I might add."

"That all depends on how you view unfair advantage," Landry countered. "We all know how many times the committee has had to redefine its standards since then. That same situation would be laughable today, with John St. Peters as the reigning king of the uneven parallel bars and Judy Yoshimada the number one contender for the gold on the still rings. The fact remains that I came here to prove that I'm the best, and that means racing and defeating Mikhailov. It'll be a shame if I'm robbed of my chance to prove that because of some technicality."

Through it all, Mikhailov acted blissfully unconcerned. While the other racers redonned their warm-up

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suits, Misha paddled playfully in the pool, waving at the members of the press, the cameras and the spectators. It didn't take long for him to win them over. Finally, the decision came. Mikhailov would have to submit to a physical examination.

However, since none of the doctors were anxious to rush their findings in such a case, particularly since there was no precedent for rendering a verdict upon a man with gills as well as lungs, the events would go on as scheduled. Afterwards, the examination would be conducted, and it would be determined whether or not the young Russian would be disqualified. This seemed to satisfy everyone concerned. No one envied the doctors their task.

Landry had to admit that Mikhailov was an incredible example of genetic engineering. He was sleek and streamlined and his skin had a flat, shark-like sheen. His hands and feet were webbed, like his, but they were larger and his muscles were long and striated. His chest capacity looked huge. The most noticeable features were, of course, the gills, set in his flanks just ahead of his manta-like latissimus dorsi muscles. They seemed to possess a life of their own as they moved with a beautiful, rippling motion.

The first event was the breast stroke. And Landry lost. He couldn't believe it. From the moment that the gun was fired, Mikhailov grabbed an early lead and increased it steadily, effortlessly. In fact, he seemed to be holding back. And then, at the end of the race, as they bobbed together in the water, Misha swam over to him to give him a comradely hug. And as he did so, he whispered in his ear, in awkward English, "You will help me, won't you Brian? Please? You'll help me to be free?"

And, in his eyes, Landry saw fear and anguish and uncertainty. He understood that if Misha *was* inhuman, he was, himself, no less so.

"Of course, I'll help you, Misha. I promise, you'll be free."

In bits and pieces, in short snatches of dialogue, Landry passed on to Misha the instructions he received. He also lost the backstroke competition, the butterfly, and the six-hundred-meter relay. Finally, the moment came. The moment when they had to make their move. The moment everyone was waiting for. The grueling marathon freestyle.

In every event thus far, Landry had taken the silver medal. The gold was clearly Misha's. He had won each race decisively, with enough lead to establish the victory, but not so much as to embarrass the other competitors. He was never more than three quarters of a lap ahead of Landry. Enough speed to break all existing records, but just barely enough. The boy wasn't even trying.

It was typical Russian strategy, begun years ago by the power-lifter

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Alexeiev, who broke the record one pound at a time, so that he could continue breaking his own record by stages every competition. Only Misha would be breaking no more records for the Russians. Not if Landry had anything to say about it.

From the very beginning, the freestyle was a race between Landry and Mikhailov. They easily outdistanced all the other swimmers. After five hundred meters, both swimmers were ahead of all the others by at least three laps. Racing in adjoining lanes, Brian and Misha cut through the water like two torpedoes. His lungs bursting, Landry pushed his body to its ultimate limits. After the thirtieth lap of the pool, he began to hallucinate.

He no longer heard the screams of the spectators echoing in the building. His entire being was filled with a hissing white noise as he willed himself to swim faster and faster. And everything around him disappeared. He could no longer make out the flashing body of Mikhailov speeding through the water just ahead of him. Instead, his eyes perceived the gray flanks of the dolphin, George, as the mammal arched up on its tail, cackling at him derisively. His every muscle fiber burning with exertion, Landry pushed himself beyond pain. And he began to close the distance between them.

They completed the forty-fifth lap, executing the flip turn together. The crowd went wild. The two swimmers broke the surface of the water, moving like twin porpoises, side by side.

"What's the matter with him?" hissed Volkov. "Why doesn't he pull ahead?"

"The American is swimming like a madman," answered the coach, Vladimiroff. "I never would have thought him capable of such an effort. At the rate he's going, I fear his heart may give out."

"There's only one length of the pool left!" said Volkov, grabbing the coach by the arm. "They are neck-and-neck!"

"We are watching a true champion," said Vladimiroff, admiringly. "For the first time in his life, Misha has a race on his hands."

"If he does not win this race," said Volkov, "there will be hell to pay."

One man was not watching the contest. While all eyes were on the pool, his were on the tall, blank-faced man standing at Vladimiroff's side. Reaching into his coat, the CIA agent removed the small airgun from its concealed pocket. He loaded it with the liquid-crystal dart that had been designed to melt on contact and leave no traces of the tranquilizer drug. As the swimmers began the final lap, he aimed.

Outside the arena, a large van waited, its turbine engine whining. Three grim-faced men sat inside, one of them listening intently to a small headset he was holding against his ear. He nodded, once, and the other two left the van, going around to its rear doors.

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They opened them and waited, tensely. Inside the rear portion of the van, stood a large, clear-walled tank filled with water. It bubbled as the water inside it was recycled, filtered and pumped back into the tank again.

Landry could see the far wall of the pool coming closer and closer. He had long ago ceased to listen to the screaming protestations of his muscles, and he ignored the pounding and the building pressure in his chest. Just a little farther... just a little farther...

The man with the dart gun spoke softly into his throat mike. "Now," he said, and fired.

Volkov clapped a hand to his temple. Just before he lost consciousness, he realized what was happening and he reached for Vladimiroff, but it was too late. Vladimiroff was running for the exit like a man possessed.

Hands were pulling Landry from the pool. The crowd surged forward, pushing past the security guards. Landry had no strength left to stand. All around him was cacophony. He saw Misha being raised up onto shoulders, dripping wet, and then it all happened at once. With a powerful kick, Mikhailov lunged from the shoulders he perched on, over the heads of the people crowding the poolside and into the waiting arms of the Americans.

"Asylum!" he screamed, over the din. "I wish asylum!"

They lifted him up, passing him over their heads like a limp doll and into the arms of two gangling track stars. Carrying him between them, the two athletes took off at a dead run, their long, powerful, ostrich-like legs taking immense strides as they took Mikhailov to the van, to water, and to safety. That sight was the last thing Landry saw before he fainted.

"Good morning," said Banyon, smiling slightly.

"Is Misha—"

"He's safe. It all went off like clockwork. The Russians are screaming bloody murder. They tried to claim we kidnapped their boy, but fortunately, enough people heard him screaming for asylum that it just won't wash. The reporters are having a field day."

"Where is he?" Landry asked, raising himself slightly off the bed.

"On his way to Washington. And from there to Bethesda. That's going to be his home for a while. He'll be there for observation indefinitely. Soon as he's up to it, we've got him scheduled for exploratory surgery."

"*Exploratory surgery?* What for?"

"We're going to see if we can't find out what makes him tick. They did some kind of job on him. We're going to put together a few Mikhailov's of our own. Should come in useful. This whole thing is going to save my bacon, after what happened with Wallford."

"He lost?"

"Yeah, well, you might say that. He had a heart attack. Coronary thrombosis. I'm afraid he didn't make it."

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Landry sank back down onto the bed. He stared up at the ceiling, thinking of the friendly, slow-witted giant, and his eyes began to fill with tears.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you," Banyon said, "Mikhailov's been declared inhuman. We've furnished the committee with documented proof that he's not an air breather." He took something from his pocket and tossed it on the bed. There was a glint of gold. "You won. Congratulations."

"Get out," said Landry, his voice hollow.

"Sure thing, Brian. Whatever you say. But before you get to feeling too noble, just remember what you said when you were spouting off for the cameras. Your own words. 'The winning is the thing.' It's what you said to Wallford, isn't it?"

"Yeah. It's what I said to Wallford." The tears were flowing down his cheeks. "And that reminds me, we had a bet, remember?"

"I remember."

"All right, then. I won and I'm calling in your marker. I want out."

"Okay. If that's what you really want. But I'd think about it, if I were you. Misha's terribly alone right now. He could use a friend. And we don't really need you anymore, you know. We've got Mikhailov. I'd sleep on that, if I were you." He left.

For a long time, Landry lay awake and stared up at the ceiling. Sleep just wouldn't come.

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Concerning an unusual Spring day in Twin Forks, in which 31,245 people turn up at the library and 83,429 come out for the Little League game. The next logical step is to the beach, of course.

Spring Fever

BY

JACK C. HALDEMAN II

Baxter Simms lived in Twin Forks, South Carolina, a small coastal town not much different from a thousand others. His family had always lived there and that was a little unusual. Seemed like most of the people in town had moved there from someplace else. Baxter couldn't figure out where they had come from, but there sure were a lot of them.

When Baxter had been born, the town had a population of less than 2,000, not counting the chickens. Now it was more like 30,000. There weren't any chickens left, either. Progress had pushed them out of the way.

The whole place was getting a little too crowded for Baxter's taste. When they put up that big condo by the beach a few years ago, he had considered moving. But the more he looked into it, the more he figured it wasn't such a good idea. Things were pretty much the same all over. Even Hog Gap down the road was pushing 50,000, and the really big cities had become impossible.

It was a nice day, sunny, warm. Baxter finished his cup of coffee and set down the morning paper. Saturday. Nothing much to do. He lit a cigarette. Could take in a movie, but he'd seen the one at the local theater, and the Multi-Cinema in the shopping center across town was just too much trouble. Nothing good on the tube, either. It was that slack season between football and baseball. Spring training had started, but there was nothing on the afternoon sports shows but golf and trash sports — TV stars playing tug-of-war, that sort of thing. A waste of time. Maybe he'd walk down to the library and check out a book. That was a good idea; he hadn't read a book in a long time. They probably had a lot of

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them in the library. He fed the cat and started out the door.

He was glad the library was close, there was a lot of traffic out on the road this morning. Cars all over the place, sidewalks crowded. Baxter wondered if it was like this every Saturday. Cars were double-parking along the side of the street and their drivers getting out and walking. Sure seemed to be a lot of people out. Must be the nice spring weather. Baxter saw Henry Davis, a neighbor and friend since childhood.

"What say, Henry?" asked Baxter.

"Not much," said Henry. "Headin' for the library. Lookin' to take me out a book."

"Me too," said Baxter, falling in step beside Henry. "Good day for it."

Henry nodded. Baxter was mildly surprised to find Henry going to the library. The most literary thing he'd seen Henry read was the label on a Budweiser bottle. They turned the corner to the library.

It was a mob scene. People stacked twenty or thirty deep all around the low brick building. More people pouring in all the time. There seemed to be some sort of a vague line, and so Baxter and Henry joined up and moved with the flow.

It wasn't a hostile line and only took a couple of hours for them to reach the door. The librarians looked a trifle harried, but by then they had figured out a system.

They'd blocked the door with a table and were handing books out, one to a person, as they filed by. Baxter got the *New World Encyclopedia*, Volume 14, Laplander to Manatee. Henry got George Alec's *Baseball Book of Facts*. They were both pleased. The person in front of them had been handed *Love Story*. His tough luck.

"I don't know much about Laplanders," said Baxter. "Manatees ought to be pretty interesting, too."

"Next to football, basketball and soccer, baseball is very nearly my favorite sport," said Henry, turning the book over and over in his hands. "You know, a man could learn a lot by checking a book out now and then."

"Sounds like a good idea to me," said Baxter, as they headed back home.

It must have sounded like a good idea to a lot of people. The Channel 13 local news at 11:00 gave it a five-minute film clip. The library had handed out 31,246 books that day — one for every man, woman, and child in Twin Forks, South Carolina. It had been the best day in the library's history, and they only had 243 books left on their shelves.

Baxter missed the newscast. He was reading about *leverage* and working his way up to *levitation* and *levity*. He hadn't turned on the tube all day.

Henry missed it too. He was wading through the 1947 pennant race.

Sunday was a nice day, even nicer than Saturday had been. Baxter had finished Volume 14. He picked up the

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paper and flipped through it. Too nice a day to stay inside. He turned to the sports section. The Little League season started this afternoon. They were playing Hog Gap. Looked to be a good game. Afterwards, the Ladies Auxiliary of the Volunteer Fire Department would be having a covered dish potluck. It might be fun. Be good to get out of the house, anyway. He set to work making a three-bean salad. Shortly after one o'clock he left.

The game was supposed to be played at the Twin Forks Comprehensive High School stadium, but long before Baxter got there, he saw signs rerouting traffic to the baseball diamond in the state park outside of town. Good thing, too. A lot of people seemed to be heading for the game. The high school stadium would never have been able to hold all the people. Cars were bumper to bumper, inching along, but moving in an orderly fashion. A policeman was directing traffic to the temporary parking lot.

"Ought to be a good game," he said as he waved Baxter into a field packed solid with cars.

"Nice day for it," said Baxter, following the car in front of him into the field.

Opening the trunk of his car, Baxter took out his beach blanket and the dish of three-bean salad. He followed the crowd to the baseball diamond. Spring was a real nice time for baseball, not like the tail end of the season when everyone got cold. A lot of people were taking advantage of the weather. He saw Henry in the crowd and they put their blankets down together on a small rise overlooking the diamond.

"Got a nephew playing today," said Henry. "Mostly he plays center field. Name of John. He can plain hit that ball."

"Hope he don't get nervous," said Baxter. "All those people watching him."

"No way," said Henry. "He's as cool as they come. Hit .407 last year."

"Is that good?" asked Baxter.

"I'll say it is. Second best in the state, would be a good average even for a pro. George Sisler lead the American League with a .407 in 1920. Rogers Hornsby only hit .370 that year and he led the National League. They were both from out west, St. Louis way. Of course Hornsby lead the league for quite a while after that, until 1925. St. Louis didn't win a pennant all those years he led the league. In 1926 he lost it to a fellow by the name of Hargrave, and St. Louis came on to win the pennant. Beat New York in the Series, too."

"You been reading your book," said Baxter.

Henry looked embarrassed. "Nothin' wrong with that," he said. "A lot of good stuff in that book. How was your book?"

"Pretty good," said Baxter, "Not much plot, but a lot of words starting with L and sometimes M. A man can learn things from a good book."

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"Ain't that the truth," said Henry. "Hornsby was manager when they beat New York in 1926. He came back to hit .327 in 1928. He was with Boston then. St. Louis won the pennant without him that year, but they lost to New York in the Series. Bet they missed old Hornsby."

"No doubt they did," said Baxter. "Did you know that a *ligule* is a thin, membranous outgrowth from the base of the blade of most grasses?"

"No foolin'?"

"Right under foot all the time. There are a lot of good things to know starting with L and sometimes M."

"I can believe that," said Henry. "I surely can." He looked out over the crowd. "A powerful lot of people here," he said.

"Looks like most all of Twin Forks and Hog Gap thrown together," said Baxter. "Of course, it *is* a nice day for it."

"I'm getting a mite hungry," said Henry. "What did you bring for the potluck?"

"Three-bean salad," said Baxter.

"So did I," said Henry.

Turns out there *were* a lot of people at the game — 83,429 to be exact. The entire population of both Twin Forks and Hog Gap with a few transients thrown in for good measure. The potluck was a huge success — 27,365 bowls of three-bean salad. Everybody had plenty to eat and went home happy.

Twin Forks won the game, 7 to 6. It was a close game and well-played. There were no errors and even the people from Hog Gap felt pretty good about it.

The next day being Monday, Baxter got up with every intention of going to work. It was a noble intention, but it didn't last very long. It was too nice a day to work. It was one of those perfect days that nothing would do but a picnic by the beach and the first swim of the year. He packed a few sandwiches and beers in his basket and put on his swimming trunks. Might as well walk, it was only a mile or so to the beach. He wasn't surprised at all to run up against Henry outside the house. He was wearing his swimming suit, too. Carrying a blanket and a picnic basket.

"Howdy, Henry," he said. "Going for a swim?"

"Yep. A picnic, too. Looks like you have the same thing in mind."

"Kind of a coincidence," said Baxter. "But it does seem like a nice day for it."

"Coincidences remind me of 1949," said Henry. "Vern Stephens and Ted Williams both batted in 159 runs to lead the league. All those games in a season, and they both hit in the same number of runs, tied for the lead."

"That sounds pretty strange, all right," said Baxter, heading down the road toward the beach.

"The very next year, that same Vern Stephens batted in 144 runs. So did Walt Dropo. Tied again for the league lead."

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"How about that?" said Baxter, weaving in and out of all the people filing toward the water, baskets in hand.

"Strange thing is that Stephens, Williams, and Dropo all played for Boston."

"That a fact? Sounds like one of those coincidences to me."

"All that power, and Boston couldn't even pull the pennant out of it. Read it in my book."

"Did some reading in that book of mine last night, too," said Baxter, sidestepping to avoid a small child with a small picnic basket. "Did you know that a fellow by the name of Thomas Robert Malthus said that the population increases geometrically while the means of subsistence increase arithmetically?"

"I didn't know that. What's that mean?"

"That means he's saying we're going to have too many people and not enough food unless something happens to lower the population."

"I never trusted people with two first names," said Henry. "But I got to admit you can't find a bean in the county today."

"I read in the paper where New York City has a population of over 35 million people now."

"Don't mean nothing," said Henry. "That's a long ways north of here." He ducked around a fat woman carrying two baskets. "Anyway, Yankee Stadium holds close to 60,000."

"Read about lemmings, too. They were in that book with all those other L's."

"Lemmings are kind of like mice, aren't they?" asked Henry.

"Sort of. But they got a few strange habits."

"That don't mean much," said Henry. "Got a few of those strange habits my own self." He turned a corner and stopped short. "Here we are," he said.

"Look at all those people," said Baxter. "I wouldn't have thought there were that many people in the whole county."

"Looks like they're having a good time, though," said Henry. "Most everyone's in the water."

"Sure is a nice day for it," said Baxter.

"Some of them are swimming a long way out," said Henry. "That sure looks like fun on a day like today." He sat down his basket. "I'm thinking I might take a dip before lunch. How about you?"

"Sounds like a fine idea," said Baxter as they elbowed their way to the edge of the ocean through the seething mass of humanity.

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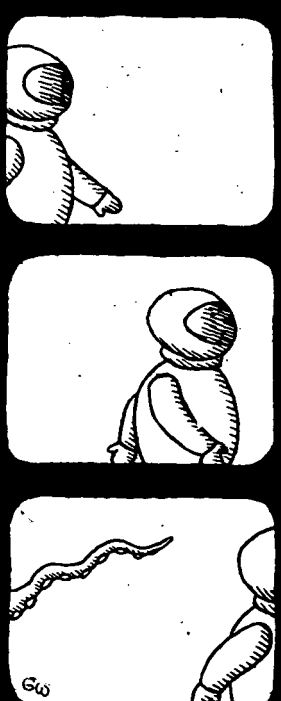
Films

BAIRD SEARLES



THE CHRONIC MARGINAL

For the second time in just a few months, I am writing about a heretofore unencountered phenomenon; a movie made from a literary work that I respect. Not necessarily *Like*, mind you, but respect. The current example is Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles*, as presented on television in three parts, directed by Michael Anderson and scripted by Richard Matheson. Given subtractions for commercials, etc., my guess is that we have here a film of four to five hours.

Since I particularly think in this case that much of what you feel about the dramatic presentation is dependent on what you feel about the book, it might be worthwhile to take a quick look at Bradbury's rather peculiar place in science fictional literature.

I say rather peculiar place because, while Bradbury is often thought of as *the* s/f writer outside the field, he has almost always occupied a position on the fringe of the genre, and some of us, at least, are a bit bemused that when the media need a spokesman for s/f, more often than not it's Mr. Bradbury who's dragged out, dusted off, and set up as same.

Believe me, I am not attacking Bradbury's work. It has not been to my taste for the past three decades nor, I would guess, to many other s/f readers'. But back in the 1940s, when the Martian "chronicles" were appearing

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one by one in various pulp magazines, they were desperately needed by and important to science fiction, which was at the point of being overrun by John W. Campbell's techies. I remember how stunning "...And the Moon Be Still as Bright" (the most beautiful of the Chronicles) was to us then with its concentration on what would now be called the ecology of Mars. Sensitivity and poeticism were new to science fiction then; in fact, Bradbury was the first of the literary stylists of the field (with the possible exception of Theodore Sturgeon).

Unfortunately, at least in some folks' view, Bradbury kept on being sensitive and poetic at the expense of coherence and consistency. And when the Chronicles appeared together in book form, they certainly did not make a whole greater than the parts; they were a lot of disparate pieces that even within themselves frequently did not contain that consistency so necessary to science fiction, that which fools us into believing the unbelievable. Essentially they were a series of fantasy variations on a non-realistic Mars, a bits-'n-pieces parable about the rape of innocence and illusion by humanity and its science.

(Curiously, several major science fiction writers share Bradbury's almost compulsive nostalgia for midwestern America in the early 20th century; Heinlein and Simak come immediately to mind.)

So I think that Bradbury *and The Martian Chronicles* belong among the marginalia of science fiction, and this was among the several problems faced by the film version. It started with a lot of "realistic" shots of lift-offs and NASA-type command posts; this would jar badly with the Bradbury Mars of pelting thunderstorms, blue skies with clouds, and inhabitants that seem to live in spiffy caves with a lot of dry ice vapor for carpeting.

The screenplay by the brilliant Richard Matheson did succeed in two areas. One was in preserving the Bradbury flavor very strongly; even if you'd never read the *Chronicles*, the author would have been recognizable immediately. (Which is one reason I said that how you felt about the movie depended on how you feel about the book.)

The other was in the attempt to provide some continuity to all these discontinuous sections; this was accomplished by providing a few characters that overlapped several stories, particularly that of Rock Hudson as the military officer in charge of Martian exploration and colonization. This device gave some sense of a whole rather than eight different stories about eight different Mars'.

Another positive aspect was much of the acting, about which I seldom get to comment, given the general level in the ordinary s/f film. Hudson is one of those solid, journeyman actors who gives conviction to any role, and I was glad of his presence here. Also note-

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worthy were the wonderful English actress, Nyree Dawn Porter, whose icy, not-quite-human quality was perfect as the robot wife of one of the settlers; the insouciant Darren McGavin as the yahoo astronaut who opens a hamburger stand on Mars; and Michael Anderson, Jr., as the Martian who takes the form of whoever is needed by those around him.

The sets/effects/costumes were less effective, in fact downright embarrassing at times. I liked the abandoned Martian city, done in sort of neo-Inca, minimalist sculpture style, but the one Martian lady we saw looked like a Busby Berkley chorus girl playing Elsa in *Lohengrin*. There were some curiously dated phrases used in the teleplay, such as "atomic war" and "rocket ships;" the latter certainly described those vehicles we saw, which looked like leftovers from an old Flash Gordon serial.

However, one magic moment was provided by the sandships of the Martians. Not in the distant shots — playtime in the kiddies' sand box — but in the closeups of the hairless, earless Martians standing in the exotic rigging, their robes fluttering in the Martian dusk. Those shots were sheer beauty, and were worth the other hours of what really came across as a series of none-too-good episodes from *The Twilight Zone*.

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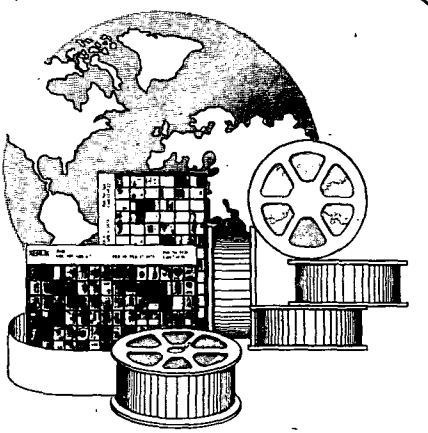

FOR INFORMATION WRITE:
Dept. F.A.

University Microfilms International

300 North Zeeb Road
Ann Arbor, Mich. 48106
U.S.A.

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London, WC1R 4EJ
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Glen Cook wrote "The Quiet Sea" (December 1978) and "Ghost Stalk" (May 1978); he is the author of two fantasy trilogies, DREAD EMPIRE, from Berkley, and THE STAR'S END TRILOGY, forthcoming from Avon. Here is another fine story about the crew of the Vengeful Dragon.

Call For The Dead

BY
GLEN COOK

I

The figure wore scarlet.

It had a small, hairless skull. Its face was as delicate as that of a beautiful woman. A rouge colored its lips. Kohl shadowed its eyes. Zodiacal pendants hung from its earlobes. Yet no observer could have sworn to its sex.

Its eyes were closed. Its mouth was open.

It sang.

Its song was terror. It was evil. Its voice stunk with its own fear.

Its lips did not move while the words came forth.

A dark basaltic throne served as its chair. A pentagram marked the floor surrounding it. That Stygian surface seemed to slope away into infinity. The arms of the pentagram, and the cabalistic signs filling them, had been sketched in brilliant reds and blues, yellows and greens. The colors rippled and changed to the tempo of the song. They surrendered to momentary flashes of silver, lilac, and gold.

Perspiration dribbled down the satin-smooth effeminate face. Veins stood out darkly at its temples. Neck and shoulder muscles became knots and cords. Small, slim, delicate hands clawed at the arms of the throne. The fingernails were long, curved, sharp, and painted the color of the fresh blood.

Torches surmounting the throne's tall back flickered, growing weaker and weaker.

The song faltered....

The figure surged, drew upon some final bastion of inner resource. A scream ripped from its throat.

The darkness gradually withdrew.

The figure slowly stood, arms

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rising. its song/scream transmuted into a cry of triumph.

Its eyes opened. They were an incredible cerulean blue, almost shining. And they were incalculably malevolent.

Then the darkness struck. A finger came from behind, swiftly, coiling round its victim like a python of night. Tendrils of the tentacle thrust into the sorcerer's nostrils and open mouth.

II

The caravel revolved slowly in an inperceptible current. The sea was cool and quiet, a plain of polished jade. Neither fin nor wind rippled its lifeless surface. It looked as unyielding as a serpentine floor.

I stared as I had for ages. It was there, but I no longer saw it.

Fog domed the place where *Vengeful Dragon* lay becalmed. It made granite walls where it met the quiet sea, but overhead it thinned. Daylight leaked through.

How many times had the sun come and gone since the gods had abandoned us to the spite of that Itaskian sorcerer? I had not counted.

Sometimes, when I tried hard enough, I drifted away from my body. Not far. The spells that bound us were of the highest order.

It pleased me that I had slain the spell-caster. If ever I escaped this pocket hell and encountered him in the afterworld, I would attack him again.

I could get free just enough to survey the scabby remnants of my drifting coffin.

Emerald moss clung to her sides. It crept a foot up from her waterline. Colorful fungi gnawed at her rotting timbers. Her rigging dangled like strands of a broken spider's web. Her sails were tatters. Their canvas was old and brittle and would crumble at the first caress of wind.

The decks were littered with fallen men.

Arrows protruded from backs and chests. Limbs lay twisted at odd, painful angles. Bowels lay spilled upon the slimy planks. Gaping wounds marked every body, including mine.

Yet there was no blood. Nor any corruption.

Not of the biological kind. Morally, *Dragon* had been the cesspool of the world.

Sixty-seven pairs of eyes stared at the grey walls of our tiny, changeless universe.

Twelve black birds perched in the savaged tops. They were as dark as the bottom of a freshly filled grave. There was no sheen to their feathers. Only the movement of their pupilless eyes betrayed their claim to life.

They knew neither impatience, nor hunger, nor boredom. They were sentinels standing guard over the resting place of old evil.

They watched the ship of the dead. They would do so forever.

They had arrived the moment our

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fate had overtaken us.

Suddenly, as one, twelve heads jerked. Yellow eyes peered into the thinner fog overhead. One short screech filled the heavy air. Dark pinions drummed a frightened bass tattoo. The birds fled clumsily into the granite fog.

I had never seen them fly. Never.

A shadow, as of vast wings, occluded the sky without actually blocking the light.

I suffered my first spate of emotion in ages. It was pure terror.

III

The caravel no longer revolved. Its battered prow pointed an erring north-northeast. A tiny swale of jade bowed around her cutwater. A shallow depression bordered her stern.

Vengeful D. was moving.

Dark avians wheeled round her splintered masts, retreated in consternation.

Our captain lay on the caravel's high poop, beneath the helm, clad in rags. Once they had been noble finery. He still clutched a broken sword. He was Colgrave, the mad pirate.

Not all Colgrave's wounds had come in our last battle. One leg had been crippled for years. Half his face had been so badly burned that a knoll of bone lay exposed on his left cheek.

Colgrave had been the worst of us. He had been the cruelest, the most wicked of men.

Our fell commander had collapsed atop several men. His eyes still stared in fiery hatred, burning like the lamps of Hell. For Colgrave, Death was a temporary lover. A woman he would betray when his time came.

Colgrave was convinced of his immortality, of his mission.

Stretched on the high forecastle deck, in rags as dark as the loss of hope, lay another man. A blue and white arrow protruded from his chest. His head and shoulders lay propped against the vessel's side. His hating eyes stared through a break in the railing opposite him. His face was shadowed by ghosts of madness.

He was me.

I hardly recognized him anymore. He seemed more alien than any of my shipmates.

I remembered him as a grinning young soldier, a cheerful boy, a hero of the El Murid Wars. He had been the kind you wanted your daughters to meet. That man on the forecastle deck, beyond his obvious injuries, had wounds to the bones of his soul. Their scars could be seen by anyone. He looked like he had endured centuries of hurt.

He had dealt more than he had received in his thirty-four years.

He was hard, bitter, petty, vicious. I could see it, know it, and admit it when looking at him from my drifting place amidst the rigging. I could not from inside.

He was not unique. His shipmates

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were all hating, soul-crippled men. They hated one another more than anything else. Except themselves.

A seven-legged spider limped down my right shoulder, across my throat, and out along my left arm. The arachnid was the last living creature aboard *Dragon*. She was weakening in her relentless quest for one more victim.

The spider's odyssey took her out onto the pale white of a hand still gripping a powerful bow. My bowstring had parted long ago, victim of rot and irresistible tension.

I felt her...! My skin twitched beneath her feet.

The spider scuttled into a crack between planks and observed with cold, hungry eyes.

My eyes itched. I blinked.

Colgrave shuddered. One spindly arm rose deliberately. Colorless fingers brushed the helm. Then his hand fell, stirred feebly in the slime covering the deck.

I tried moving. I could not. What a will Colgrave had!

It had driven us for years, compelling us when no other force in Heaven or Hell could move us.

A shadow with saffron eyes wheeled above us. It uttered short, sharp cries of dismay.

Tendrils of the darkness that could not be seen were weaving new evils on the loom of wickedness of our accursed ship. And the watchers could do nothing. The sorcerer who had summoned them, who had commanded them and who had charged them with watching and bearing tidings, was no more.

I had silenced his magical songs forever with a last desperate shaft from my bow.

The birds could fly to no one with their fearful news. Nor could anyone liberate them from their bondage.

One by one my shipmates stirred the slightest, then returned to their long rests.

Sometimes in darkness, sometimes in light, the caravel glided northward. The shadow-weaver ran its shuttle to and fro. No foul weather came to gnaw on our ragged floating Hell. The fog surrounding us neither advanced nor receded, nor did the water we sailed ever change. It always resembled polished jade.

My shipmates did not move again.

Then darkness descended upon me, the oblivion for which I had longed since my realization that *Vengeful Dragon* was not just another pirate, but a seagoing purgatory manned by the blackest souls of the western world....

And while I slept in the embrace of the Dark Lady, the weaver weaved. The ship changed. So did her crew. And the watchbirds followed in dismay.

IV

A dense fog gently bumped Itaskia's South Coast. It did not cross

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the shoreline. The light of a three-quarters moon gleamed off its low-lying upper surface. It looked like an army of wool-balls come to besiege the land.

A ship's main truck and a single spar cut the fog's surface like a shark's fin, moving north.

The moon set. The sun rose. The fog dissipated gradually, revealing a pretty caravel. She had a new but plain look, like a miser's beautiful wife cloaked in homespun.

The fog dwindled to a single irreducible cloud. That refused to disperse. It drifted round the ship's decks. Black birds dipped in and out.

I began to itch all over. My skin twitched. Awareness returned. Straining, I opened my eyes.

The sun blazed in. I decided to roll over instead.

It was the hardest thing I had ever done. A physical prodigy.

Battered old Colgrave staggered to his feet. He leaned on the helm and scanned the gentle sea. He wore a bewildered frown.

Here, there, my shipmates stirred. Who would the survivors be? Barley, the deadly coward? Priest, the obnoxious religious hypocrite? The Kid, whose young soul had been blackened by more murders than most of us older men? My almost-friend, Little Mica, whose sins I had never discovered? Lank Tor? Toke? Fat Poppo? The Trolledyngjan? There were not many I would miss if they did not make it.

I climbed my bow like a pole. I could feel the expression graven on my face. It was wonder. It tingled through me right down to my toenails.

We had no business being anywhere but perpetually buried in that sorcerer's trap.

I scanned the horizon suspiciously, checked the maindeck, then met my Captain's eyes. There was no love between us, but we respected one another. We were the best at what we were.

He shrugged. He, too, was ignorant of what was happening.

I had wondered if he had not brought the resurrection about by sheer force of will.

I bent and collected an oiled leather case. Inside lay twelve arrows labeled with colored bands, and several new bowstrings. My bow, which had been exposed for so long, had been restored by careful oiling and rubbing. I strung and tested it. It remained as powerful as ever. I did not then have the strength to bend it completely.

A dozen men were afoot. They searched themselves for wounds that had disappeared during the darkness.

I wondered how many had shared my vigil of impotent awareness, denied even the escape of madness.

They started checking each other.

I looked for Mica. I spotted the little guy studying himself in a copper mirror. He ran fingers over a face that had been half torn away.

Everyone was recovering.

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I descended to the maindeck and strolled aft. *Dragon* was in the best shape I had ever seen. She had been *renewed*....

I walked stiffly. The others moved jerkily, like marionettes manipulated by a novice. I reached the ladder to the poop as vanguard of a committee. Our First Officer and Boatswain, Toke and Lank Tor, had joined me. Old Barley tagged along, hoping the Old Man would order a ration of rum.

Barley was one of the alcoholic in-group. Priest was another. He was watching Barley closely. Barley always did the doling.

Rum! My mouth watered. Only Priest could outdrink me.

Colgrave shooed his deck watch down the starboard ladder.

Why hadn't our mysterious benefactors done a full repair job on the Captain? I looked round. Several men had not been restored completely. We were as we had been the day we had stumbled into the Itaskian sorcerer's trap.

Colgrave was first to speak. He said, "Something's happened." Not an ingenious deduction.

My response was no more brilliant. "We've been called back."

Colgrave's voice had a remote, sephulcral timbre. It seemed to reach us after a journey up a long, cold, furniture-crowded hallway. There was no force in it. It had no volume, and very little inflection.

"Tell me something I don't know, Bowman," Colgrave growled.

The lack of love between us was not unique. This crew had shipped together, and fought together, by condemnation of the gods. We cooperated only because survival demanded it.

"Who did? Why?" I demanded. Again I scanned the horizons.

I was not a lone watcher. We had powerful enemies along these coasts. Dread enemies, they had at their disposal the aid of men like the one who had banished us to that enchanted sea.

"We don't have time to worry about it." Colgrave threw a spidery hand at the coast. "That's Itaskia, gentlemen. We're only eight leagues south of the Silverbind Estuary."

The Itaskian Navy had sent that sorcerer after us. Itaskians hated us. Especially Itaskian merchants. We had plundered them so often that we used gold and silver for ballast.

We had preyed on them for ages, slaughtering their crews and burning their ships during our relentless search for what, in the end, had proven to be ourselves.

The great naval base at Portsmouth lay just inside the mouth of the estuary.

"Coast watchers have spotted us by now," Colgrave continued. "The news will have reached Portsmouth. The fleet will be coming out."

It did not occur to us that we could have been forgotten. Or that we might not be recognized. But we did not

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know how long we had been gone, nor did *Dragon* look the same.

"We better get this bastard headed out to sea," Tor said. "Head for the nether coast of Freyland. Hole up in a cove till we know what's happening." Some timbre entered the Boatswain's voice. It smelled of fear.

We had never been well-known in the island kingdoms. Seldom had we plundered there.

"We'll do that. Meantime, check out this tub from stem to stern. Check the men. Tor, take a look round from the tops. They could be after us already."

Tor had the best eyes of any man I've ever known.

The crew milled below, touching each other, speculating in soft tones. Their voices, too, sounded remote. I do not know why that was. It soon corrected itself.

"First watch," Tor called. "Rigging. Prepare to shift sail for the seaward tack."

They moved slowly, stiffly, but sorted themselves out. Some clambered into the rigging. Lank Tor said, "Ready to shift course, Captain."

Colgrave spun the wheel. Tor bellowed to the topmen.

Nothing happened.

Colgrave tried again. And again. But *Vengeful D.* would not respond.

We just stood round staring at one another till Kid called down, "Sail ho!"

* * *

V

"Boatswain, see to the weapons," Colgrave ordered.

I looked at him narrowly. A fire was building within him. Action imminent. The old Colgrave flared through, despite what we had endured, despite what we had learned about ourselves. "See that sand is scattered on the decks. Barley! One cup for all hands. Bowman. Take yours first. Go to the forecastle."

Our gazes locked. I had had my fill of killing. At least for this madman.

But the compulsion was still there. The fire that forced a man to adapt his will to Colgrave's. I looked down like a kid who had just been scolded. I descended to the maindeck.

Mica caught up with me. "Bowman. What's going on? What happened to us?"

He called me Bowman because he did not know my name. None of them did, unless Colgrave had penetrated the secret. It was one I could no longer answer myself.

Vengeful Dragon had a way of stealing memories. I could not remember coming aboard. I did remember murdering my wife and her lovers before I did. But what was her name...?

The curse of the gods lies heavy. To remember my crime, to remember the love and hate and pain that had gone into and pursued it, and yet to forget the very name of the woman I had killed.... And, worse, to have forgotten

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my own, so that the very cornerstone of my identity was denied me.... They award their penalties in cruel and ingenious ways, do the gods.

Some of the others remembered their names but had forgotten why they had committed their sins. That, too, was torture.

None of us remembered much of our life aboard *Vengeful Dragon.*

Colgrave and I had the murder of our families in common. That was not much of a foundation for friendship.

"I don't know, Mica. No more than you."

"I thought maybe the Old Man.... It scares me, Bowman. To be recalled...."

"I know. Think of the Power involved. The evils unleashed.... Come on up to the forecastle with me, Mica."

He did not have anything else to do. He was our sailmaker. Our sails were in chandler's shop condition.

We leaned against the rail, staring over the quiet green water at the tops of a pair of triangular sails.

"That's no Itaskian galleon," Mica observed.

"No." I debated for several seconds before I hinted at my suspicion. "Maybe the gods are tinkering with us, Mica." A gull glided across our bows. For a moment I marveled at its graceful flight. A shadow followed. One of the black birds.

"Suppose they're giving us another chance?"

He watched the black bird for several seconds. "How patient are they, Bowman? We had our chances in life. We had them in limbo, while we harried the coasts. And we didn't even recognize them."

"And maybe we couldn't. This ship.... We forget things. We stop thinking. We get like Lank Tor, who can't remember yesterday. Remember Student and Whaleboats?"

They had been friends of ours. They had disappeared during a terrible storm shortly before the sorcerer had caught us.

"Uhm."

We had never talked about it, but the suspicion could not be denied. There was a chance that Student and Whaleboats had found redemption. There was a connection between righteous deeds and disappearances from *Dragon.*

It *had* to be more than coincidence. Our memories were reliable only back to the time Kid had come aboard, but since then several men had vanished. Each had been guilty of doing something truly *good* shortly before.

How Colgrave had screamed and cussed at Student and Whaleboats for not setting fire to that shipload of women....

"Student claimed there was a way out. Fat Poppo told me he figured it out too. I think there is. I think they found it. And I think I know what it is too, now."

Mica did not say anything for at least a minute. Then, "Did you die in

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that place, Bowman?"

"What?" For some reason I did not want to tell him. "What place?"

"The foggy sea, dummy. Where we met ourselves and lost the battle."

Colgrave's habit was to destroy every vessel we encountered. We had entered that quiet place out of a deep fog, with a sorcerer's grim promise still ringing in our ears. Black birds had roosted in our tops and another ship had been headed our way. Colgrave, mad Colgrave, had ordered the attack. And when we had come to grips with the caravel, who had we found manning her but doppelgangers of ourselves....?

"Were you aware the whole time?"

"Yeah." The grunt like to choked me getting out. "Every damned second. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't even go crazy."

He raised an eyebrow.

"All right. Crazier than I already am."

Mica grinned. "Sometimes, Bowman, I wonder if we're not just a little less wicked than we think. Or maybe it's pretend. We're great pretenders, the crew of the *Vengeful D.*"

"Mica, you ain't no philosopher."

"How do you know what I am? I don't. I don't remember. But what I'm saying, man, is I think we all knew what was going on. Every minute. Even the Old Man."

"What's the point?"

"The sun rose and set a lot of times, Bowman. I didn't sleep either. That's a lot of time to think. And maybe change."

I turned my back to the rail. The crew were about ship's work. They were quieter than I remembered. Thoughtful. They moved less jerkily now.

How long had it been? Years?

"We don't look any different." Colgrave was the same old specter of terror there on the poop. He had changed clothing. He was clad in regal finery now. Clothes were his compensation for his deformity.

When he dressed this well, and kept the poop instead of lurking in his cabin, he meant to spill blood.

"I mean different inside." He considered Colgrave too. "Maybe some of us can't change. Maybe there's nothing else in there."

"Or maybe we just don't understand." I suffered an insight. "The Old Man's scared."

"He should be. These are Itaskian waters. Look what they did already."

"Not just afraid of what they'll do if they catch us. We had that hanging over us before. It didn't bother anybody. Won't now. I mean scared like Barley. Of everything and nothing."

Old Barley was our resident coward. He was also the meanest fighter on the *Vengeful D.* His fear drove him to prodigies in battle.

"Maybe. And maybe he's changed too."

"I haven't. Not that I can see."

"Look at your right hand."

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I did. It was my hand, fore and middle fingers calloused from drawing bowstrings. "So?"

"Every guy here can tell you two things about your hands. If there's a ship in sight, your left will be holding a bow. And so it is. And your right, when Colgrave lets you, will be hanging on to a cup of rum like it was your first-born child."

I looked at Mica. He smiled. I looked at my hand. It was naked. I looked down at the maindeck, that I had crossed without thinking of rum. Barley was almost finished issuing the grog ration.

The craving hit me hard. I must have staggered. Mica caught my arm.

"Try to let it go, Bowman. Just this once."

I waved at Barley.

"Just to see if you can do it."

Why didn't he mind his own business? Gods, I needed a drink.

Then Priest caught my eye. Priest, the king of us alkies. The man who peddled salvation to the rest of us and remained incapable of saving himself.

Priest did not have a tin cup either. He leaned over the starboard rail. His expression said that his guts were tearing him apart. His need for a drink was devouring him. But he was not drinking. His back was to Barley.

"Look at Priest," I murmured.

"I see him, Bowman. And I see you."

The cramps started then. They pissed me off. I whirled and planted myself against the rail, mimicking Priest, overlooking the bowsprit. I tried to shut out the world.

"No way that pervert is going to outlast me," I declared.

Our bow began rising and falling gently. The water was assuming the character of a normal sea. Our resurrection was about finished.

I did not look forward to its completion. I could get seasick in a rowboat on a lake on a breezy day.

The other vessel was hull up on the horizon and headed our way fast.

I re-examined my bow and arrows. Just in case.

VI

Had we changed? The gods witness, we had. The two-master came in alongside, gently, and we did not swarm over her. We did not cast her screaming crew to the sharks. We did not set her aflame. We did not do anything but hold our weapons ready and wait.

Colgrave did not ask us to do anything more.

Mica and I surveyed our shipmates. I'm sure he saw as much wonder in my face as I saw in his.

We watched Colgrave almost constantly. The Old Man would determine the smaller vessel's fate. Like it or not, if he gave the order, we would attack.

"We're a pack of war dogs," I told Mica. "We might as well be slaves."

He nodded.

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Never a word escaped our mad captain's mouth. That astonished him more than the rest of us, I think.

The ship lay bumping against *Dragon* for fifteen minutes. Her strangely clad, silent crewmen studied us. We studied them. Not a one would meet my eye. They knew who and what we were. We could smell the fear in them.

Yet they had come to us, and they stayed. And that was reason for us to fear.

The vessel had a small deckhouse amidships. Its door finally opened. Two more strangers stepped out, stationed themselves to either side. They studied us with startled, frightened eyes.

A person in red came forth, looked up.

"A woman!" Mica swore.

We did not have a reputation for being gallant.

"I don't think so...." But I could not be sure. I had never seen a bald woman. "But.... Call it an it."

Its incredible blue eyes stared in slight bewilderment. Unlike its shipmates, it did not fear us. It was confident.

I got the impression that we had been a disappointment. Because we had not conformed to our vicious reputation.

The urge to let an arrow fly was as strong in me as the need for a drink. I did not bend my bow.

One glance into those weird eyes was all I could handle. Incredible Power sparked them. They proclaimed their possessor a sorcerer greater than he who had banished us to fogs and leaden seas.

The creature also had that aura of command that animated Colgrave.

"This's the one who called us back," I whispered.

Mica nodded.

I had myself in control. I tested the draw of my bow.

Black birds wheeled overhead, screeching their consternation. One dove at the figure in red.

The figure raised a palm. It spoke a single word.

Feathers exploded. They spun down toward ships and sea, smoldering as they fell. The stench of burnt feathers assailed the air.

The naked albatross smashed into *Dragon's* side. It broke its neck. It thrashed in the water briefly, then changed form. In seconds it became a thing like a snake of night. The thing wriggled away through water and air with lightning speed.

Its companions screeched once, then remained silent. They did not cease their endless patrol. They clearly prefered avoiding their comrade's liberation.

The figure in red said something.

Someone shouted orders in a strange language. Sailors threw grappling hooks over *Dragon's* rail.

I looked at Colgrave. An arrow lay across my bow.

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He made a slight negative head gesture.

"He *has* changed," I told Mica. "He says let them come." I looked again. Colgrave was instructing Toke and Lank Tor. They descended to the maindeck.

They disposed the men in such fashion that they could attack the boarders from all sides.

We waited.

One of the smaller ship's officers came up. He looked round, saw the lay of things. He was not happy. He glanced at me. I half drew my bow. He cringed.

I laughed. Old Barley giggled. The crew took it up.

We were not kind people. We enjoyed tormenting our captives.

Again Colgrave gave me that little headshake. A nasty grin smeared his face too. He liked my joke.

More of them came. And more, and more.

"Mica, they're all coming over."

"Looks like."

They stood on the maindeck, nervously watched Colgrave.

"Slide back and tell the Old Man we can sneak down and knock a hole in their bottom when they're all up here. If he wants."

Mica grinned. "Yeah." It was his kind of dirty trick. He liked sneaking.

I expect his sins involved some fancy sneakiness. He wasn't chicken, mind. Just the kind of guy who sees the advantages of back-stabbing. A low-risk type guy. He could handle himself face-to-face, when the stakes were high. He shoved through the strangers. They twisted away from him like he was a plague carrier.

I watched a grin spread across Colgrave's battered face. It was as lopsided as the altars of Hell. The muscles only worked on one side.

He liked it. My suggestion did not violate his inexplicable armistice with the creature in red.

Mica almost danced back to the forecastle.

The sorcerer boarded last. Its crew surrounded it. It disappeared among them. They were all bigger.

I laughed, catching the creature's attention. I again half drew my bow.

It looked at me with no apparent fear, but I knew better. I knew I could take the sorcerer if just one instant's gap opened through those bodyguards.

We had not been stripped of our defenses. I could get an arrow from here to there quicker than the creature could blink.

It knew too. That was why it had brought its whole crew. In the time it would take us to kill them, it could perform the sorceries needed to save itself.

It, too, concentrated on Colgrave.

The Old Man's eye flicked my way just once, for a tenth of a second.

Mica and I rolled over the rail into the ratlines, transferred to the other vessel's stays, got down to her deck in seconds.

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"Bowman, you see about sinking her. I'll go through the cabin."

"Good thinking. But look for something besides loose gold."

He gave me a look.

I looked back. Gold was Mica's weakness. Whenever we took a ship, he spent most of the victory celebration scrounging gold and silver. He brought it back, and we took it down and put it in ballast, never knowing what we would ever do with it.

That was one tough little ship. It took me twenty minutes to chop a decent hole through her thin planking. By the time I finished I knew she would not sink before the strangers could get back aboard.

I chuckled. That made the joke richer.

I hustled back topside. We were taking too long. "Mica!" I called softly. "Come on. We haven't got all day."

He poked his head out the deckhouse door. "Here. Take some of this crap."

He had gotten some gold, of course. But not much. The rest seemed to be books, papers, and the thinggobbies sorcerers have to have to be comfortable doing their nasties.

VII

I rolled over Dragon's rail expecting all eyes to be looking my way.

None were. None did. The strangers were crowded against the base of the poop. Colgrave stood above them, a mocking smile on half his face. Everybody stared at him like he was some demon god.

Sometimes I thought he was myself.

The men were impatient. The strangers felt it. Their fear was about to become panic. Only the will of the creature in red kept them from running.

Mica handed up our plunder. I concealed it beneath a spritsail lying on the forecastle deck. Mica rolled over the rail.

Colgrave's glance flicked our way. His smile stretched. He terminated the audience with a shrug and a turned back.

The creature in red started back to its vessel. Its followers surged around it, eager to be gone.

I half drew my bow for the third time.

The creature in red smiled at me.

That made me mad. I would have let fly had Colgrave not shook his head.

Nobody mocked the Bowman....

Then they were gone, their vessel turning away and heading back whence it had come. They stood around watching us, as if to make sure we did not change our minds about letting them go.

Their ship was a foot lower in the water already. Soon they would realize that she was not responding properly. They would discover the hole....

I had cut it too big for them to keep afloat by pumping. And I doubted that

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they would be able to get a good patch on it. I slapped Mica's back. "Let's take the stuff to the Old Man."

It was not a chore that pleased me. Though it was unavoidable, I plain did not like being anywhere near Colgrave. But with Student gone, he was the only reader left aboard.

Anyway, he needed to know what we had. If anything.

He stirred through the pile. Mica's personal plunder he pushed to one side. Mica took it below. The rest Colgrave sorted into three piles. A half-dozen items he just flipped over his shoulder, over the rail, into the sea. Then he examined the piles again. He deep-sixed several more items.

Toke, Tor, and I watched in silence. Colgrave kept dithering, poking. I don't think he knew what he had. But Colgrave was not the type to admit ignorance.

Finally, I could stand no more. "What did they want?" I demanded.

"The usual," Colgrave replied without looking up. "A little murder. A little terror. With his enemies on the bull's-eye, of course. Not ours."

"His?"

"I think it was a he. You cut a big hole, Bowman?"

"Big enough. It'll stop them." He seemed so damned blasé after what had been done to us. Was he still trusting in divine protection? After the Itaskian sorcerer? If so, he was a fool.

That was one thing that had never been pinned on Colgrave.

"Tor, go to the masthead. Let us know when they go dead in the water. Toke, make sail for Freyland. I think she'll respond now."

I watched while Colgrave examined several books. He seemed awfully undignified, sitting on the deck with his legs crossed. Finally, "Captain, what're we going to do?"

He peered at me with that one evil eye till I thought he was going to have me thrown to the sharks. One did not address Colgrave. Colgrave called one to the presence.

He finally replied, "It would be a raid to belittle anything we've ever tried. Portsmouth itself. Burn the docks. Burn the town. Kill everybody we can."

"Why?"

"I didn't ask, Bowman." His voice was cold and hard. He was tired of my questions. Yet I remained where I was. He *had* changed. He was more open than ever I had seen. "He ordered us. We haven't yet tested the limits of his control. We may not be able to do otherwise."

"And we do have our grievances."

"Yes. We have scores to settle with Portsmouth."

Dragon shifted her heading to north-northeast. We were on course for the island kingdoms.

"The little sailmaker must have overlooked something," Colgrave said. "There's nothing here we can use. All we can do is deny this stuff to him."

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"She's taking in sail, Captain," Tor called down. A vast amusement filled his voice.

The story had passed through the crew, spread by Mica. There was a lot of laughter.

I looked north. I could barely make out the other vessel.

Damn, did that Tor have eyes.

Excellent eyes. "Sail ho!" he called a moment later. "She's a big one. War galleon, by her look."

His arm thrust aft. Colgrave and I turned.

We could just make out her main tops. I looked at Colgrave.

I could see the torment in him. The need... He had to have bloodshed the way I had to have rum, had to use my bow.

"She's an Itaskian," Tor called a few minutes later. The bloodlust filled his voice. He, too, needed the killing.

Nervousness and uncertainty washed the maindeck. The men no longer had the absolute confidence that had impelled them before our capture.

Dragon had changed indeed. And was changing still.

"Maintain your heading, First Officer," Colgrave finally croaked.

It tore him up to say it. But he did.

A breeze came up. It took us on our port quarter, setting us to landward. The more we turned to seaward, the harder it blew.

The smell of wizardry tainted it.

Colgrave gathered Mica's plunder, took it to his cabin, then returned to the poop. He said nothing more. The stubborn Colgrave of old, he kept *Dragon's* course inalterably fixed on Freyland.

We passed within three hundred yards of the sorcerer's ship. Its crew were too busy keeping from drowning to pay attention. Several called for help. We sailed on.

Colgrave laughed at them. I'm sure his voice carried that far.

The breeze died soon afterward, as the other ship began going under. I guess the wizard needed to concentrate on surviving.

One round for us.

We took orders from nobody. Not even those who pretended to be our saviors.

That is what Tor said the thing in red had claimed when it had spoken to Colgrave. It had wanted to bargain.

To bargain? I thought. Then its hold on us could not be as strong as it would like.

I smiled. And stood on the forecastle looking forward to the coasts of Freyland. It had been a long time since we had sailed them.

The black birds circled overhead. After a time, one by one, they settled into our tops. They seemed less outraged than they had been.

VIII

Spring had only recently conquered the western shores of Freyland. The cove where we anchored was sur-

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rounded by low, forested hills blushing green. The afternoons were warm and lazy.

There was nothing to do. For the first time since I had come aboard, *Dragon* was in perfect repair. Half the ship's work being done was stuff Toke and Lank Tor conjured up because they did not have anything to do either. For several days we just plain loafed.

But in the background lurked the nagging questions, the aching doubts. What would Colgrave decide? Would it be the right thing?

"Right thing?" Mica demanded. Pure amazement animated his features. "What the hell kind of question is that, Bowman?"

He and I and Priest had rigged us a couch of folded sail and were lying back staring at cloud castles while dangling fishing lines over the side. Fishing was something I had not done since boyhood.

I could not remember that far back. I just knew that I had liked to fish.

"It's a valid question," Priest insisted. "We have come to the crossroads of righteousness, Sailmaker. We stand at the forking of the way...."

"Oh, knock it off, Priest," I grumbled. "Don't you ever give up?"

"I think I got a bite," he replied.

"Take it easy, Bowman," Mica said. "He's getting better."

That he was, I had to admit. I used to loathe Priest because he insisted on being our conscience while remaining one of the worst sinners himself.

Priest dragged a small fish over the side. "I'll be damned."

"Doubtless. We're all damned. We have been for ages."

"That's debatable. I meant the fish."

It was a little speckled sand shark about sixteen inches long. Not exactly what we were after. I started to smash its head with my heel.

"Why don't you just throw it back?" Mica asked. "It ain't hurting nothing."

Trouble was, the shark did not want to go. Not with our help. Its little jaws kept going chompity-chomp. Its skin sandpapered the hide off my fingers when I tried to hold it so Priest could get his hook back.

It died before we could save it.

"You was talking about doing the right thing," Mica told me. "What made you say that? I never heard the Bowman talk that way before."

I gave him a look.

Priest took his side. "He's right. Colgrave's the only man here meaner than the Bowman."

I did not agree. At least, I had never thought of it that way. I rated Priest and Old Barley meaner than me any day.

The Kid came up and joined us. He had been keeping a low profile lately. He seemed to be completely tied up inside himself. Ordinarily, he was our number-one showoff, our number-one mouth man.

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I was at the end of the sail couch. He sat down beside me.

Amazing.

I kind of liked the Kid. Really. He reminded me of myself when I was younger. But he had no use for me. I never understood, unless it was true that I looked like somebody he had hated before coming aboard.

"Hey, Bowman. What do you think?" he asked.

"Hunh? About what, Kid?" Why was he asking me? Anything.

"About this. About us coming back." He sat up, started making himself a fishing line of his own. He fumbled around. It was obvious that he had never fished in his life. I helped him get it right.

And I asked him why he was asking me.

"Because you're the smart guy now that Student's gone. Toke. Lank Tor. They're just zombies. And the Old Man wouldn't give me the time of day if I begged."

"Kid. Kid, I...." I let it drift off unsaid.

"What?"

I forced it. "I never much cared about anybody. But it hurts me to see you here, so young."

He looked at me strangely, then smiled. That smile was worth a ton of gold. "I earned it, Bowman."

"Didn't we all?" Mica mused.

"That we did," Priest declared. "The sins on our souls...." He shut himself off, said instead, "The question is, are we going to go right on deserving it?"

Mica got a bite. He hauled in another goddamned shark. This one was more cooperative. Or we had gotten better at handling them.

"Kid, I don't know what to think. That's the gospel. I'm lost. I go half crazy worrying about it sometimes."

A body plopped down the other side of Kid. I glanced over. It was the Trolledyngjan, the final addition to our mad crew. We had picked him up off an Itaskian warship we had taken in our next-to-last battle. He had been confined to her brig.

He had a name, Torfin something, but nobody ever used it. He was one long drink of silence. I don't think he had spoken twenty words the whole time he had been aboard. He did not say anything now. He just looked at me and Mica.

We had tried to kill him once. Before he had become part of our crew. Back when we were raiders. We had attacked his ship. He had tried boarding us. Me and Mica had dumped him into the drink.

And then he had turned up aboard the Itaskian, and Colgrave had decided he ought to replace Student or Whaleboats.

A treaty of forgiveness passed between us without words being spoken.

Trolledyngjan said, "There be tales told in the Fatherland of the Oskoreien. The Wild Hunt. They be souls of the damned who ride Hell's

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stallions through the high range hunting the living."

The Kid passed him a hook and some line. He started fiddling with it.

"What're you driving at?" I asked.

"We be the Oskoreien of the sea." He baited his hook and flipped it over the side. We waited. Finally, he continued, "They tell of the Wild Hunt that they be hating none so much as they be hating one another."

We waited some more, but that was all he had to say.

It was enough. It made me think.

He had stated a truth and had posed a question in a characteristically oblique Trolledyngjan manner.

Hatred had always been the one shared, unifying emotion aboard *Dragon*. And we hated each other more than any outsiders.

Only, we were getting along now. More or less.

The others saw it too. Even the Kid. "What's it mean, Bowman?" the boy asked.

"I don't know."

The changes were progressing. I no longer knew myself. If ever I had.

Fat Poppo laboriously clambered to the forecastle deck. His appearance was another declaration of how the crew regarded me.

"Welcome to the philosophy klatch, Poppo," I said. "What brings you dragging your ass all the way up off the maindeck?" He seldom moved if he did not have to, so fat and lazy was he.

He dropped to his knees behind me, whispered, "In the trees across the cove. Under the big dead one you guys been calling the hanging tree."

I looked. And I saw what he meant.

There were four of them, and they wore livery. Soldiers.

The honeymoon was over. "Mica, slide down and dig up the Old Man. Tell him to take a gander at what we've got under the hanging tree. Try to keep it casual."

Colgrave had been holed up in his cabin since we had dropped anchor. He was studying the wizard's things. He would not appreciate being disturbed.

But this was important.

Maybe I made a mistake. The rest of us might not have been recognized. We were well-known, but there was nothing really unique about our appearances. Not the way Colgrave's was unique.

I reached for my bow and quietly strung it behind the mask of the railing.

IX

Colgrave strode from his cabin dressed for a day at court. Mica dogged along behind him as he climbed to the poop. He turned his one grim eye on our watchers.

"The dead captain!"

It carried clearly over the water. Brush crackled. I leapt to my feet and

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pulled an arrow to my ear.

"It's them! That's the Archer!"

"Bowman. Let them run."

I relaxed. Colgrave was right. Wasting arrows had no point. I could not get them all. Not through the trees.

Still, a gesture seemed necessary....

One turned, stared back through a small opening in the foliage. He bore a spade-shaped shield. A griffin rampant was its device. I let fly with a waste arrow, a practice arrow. It pierced the griffin's eye.

I still had it. After however long it had been, my shafts still flew true.

The soldier's jaw dropped. I bowed mockingly.

"That wasn't smart," Priest told me.

"Couldn't help myself. I had to do it."

The black birds above cursed me in their squawky tongue. I glared my defiance.

My archery was my one skill, my one way of defying the universe and its perversity. The gesture had been important to me. It was a statement that the Bowman existed, that he was well, that his aim was still deadly. It was a graffito on the walls of time, screaming I AM!

Colgrave beckoned.

I shook in my seaboots. I was going to catch hell for defying orders....

But he did not mention my shot. Instead, he gathered Toke, Lank Tor, and myself, and told us: "The decision is at hand. Within two days the whole island will know we've returned. They'll know in Portsmouth in three days, in Itaskia in four. They won't endure us anymore. Our return will scare them so much that they'll send out every ship they have. They won't trust warlocks this time. They'll destroy us absolutely, with fire, at whatever cost we demand."

He stared at the western sea, his one good eye gazing on sights the rest of us could never see. He said again, "At whatever cost we demand."

Tor giggled. Fighting was his only love, his only joy. He did not care whether he would win or lose, only that he would be able to swing a blade in another battle. He was the same old Tor. I did not think there was anything in him capable of change. He was a hollow man.

Toke said, "There's no hope, then? We have to depart this plane memorialized by mountains of dead men and seas scattered with burning ships?"

I sighed. "There's nowhere to run, Toke. Destiny's winds have blown us into the narrow channel. We can't do anything but ride with the current."

Colgrave looked at me strangely. "That's odd talk from you, Bowman."

"I feel odd, Captain."

"There's still the sorcerer who recalled us," he said. "And we aren't forgotten of the gods. Not completely." He glanced at the black birds.

The creatures strained their necks toward us.

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I surveyed my long-time home. Forward, against the base of the forecastle, I could discern a tiny, almost invisible patchlet of dark fog. I had not noticed it since the day the sorcerer had boarded us. I imagined it had always been there, unnoticed because it stayed behind the corner of my vision.

"I'll give my orders in the morning," Colgrave declared. "For today, celebrate. Our final celebration. Tor. See to the arms. Toke, tell Barley to use his keys."

My guts snapped into an agonized knot. Rum...!

"We'll sail at dawn," the Old Man told us. "Be ready. I'll tell you our destination then."

He scanned us once with that wicked eye, and it seemed that there was pain and care in his gaze. He left us there, stunned, and returned to his cabin.

Emotion? In Colgrave? It was almost too much to bear.

I returned to the forecastle and plopped my ass down between the Kid and Little Mica. I leaned back and stared at the clouds, at the green hills where four terrified soldiers were racing to unleash the hounds of doom. "Damned!" I muttered. "Damned. Damned. Damned."

The Kid was first to ask. "What did he say, Bowman?"

I glared at the hills as if my gaze could drop those Freylanders in their tracks. "We sail with the morning tide. He hasn't decided where or why."

The Trolledyngjan hooked a sand shark. We went through the routine, dumped it back.

"Think it's the same one?" Priest asked. "It don't look any different."

"Why would it keep coming back?" Mica wanted to know.

The Kid asked me, "What do you think he'll decide, Bowman?"

"To spill blood. He's still Colgrave. He's still the dead captain. He only knows one way. The only question is who he'll go after."

"Oh."

"Give me a line." I baited my hook and flipped it over the rail. "Priest, Barley's passing out grog." I needed a drink something cruel. But I was not going to give in first.

I watched the torment in his face. And he watched it in mine as he replied, "Don't think so, Bowman. Too far to walk. Besides, I'm getting a nibble."

He got the nibble, but I caught the fish. It was the same damned shark. What was the matter with that thing? Couldn't it learn?

Dragon rocked gently on quiet swells. A breeze whispered in the trees surrounding the cove. We kept catching that sand shark and throwing it back, and not saying much, while the sun dribbled down to the horizon behind us.

X

Toke, Lank Tor, and I clambered

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up to the poop. The crew gathered on the maindeck, their eyes on the Old Man's cabin door. The sun had not yet cleared the hills to the east.

"Tide's going to turn soon," Toke observed.

"Uhm," I grunted.

Lank Tor shuffled nervously. The blood-eagerness in him seemed tempered by something else this morning. Had the changes began to reach even him?

Colgrave came forth.

The crew gasped.

Tor, Toke, and I leaned over the poop rail to see why.

He wore old, battered, plain clothing. It was the sort a merchant captain down on his luck might wear. There wasn't a bit of color or polish on him.

A new Colgrave confronted us. I was not sure I liked it. It made me uneasy, as if the man's style of dress were the root of our failures and successes.

He ignored everybody till he had reached the poop and surveyed his surroundings. Then, "Make sail, First Officer. North along the coast, two points to seaward. They're watching. Let them think we're bound for North Cape."

Toke and Tor went to get anchor and sails up. I stood beside Colgrave, searching the shore for this morning's watchers.

He said, "We'll keep this heading till we're out of sight of land. Then we'll come round and run south. We'll stay in the deep water."

I shuddered. We were not deep-water sailors. Though hardly any of us had set foot on dry land in years, we did not want to let it out of sight. Few of us had been sailors before fate shanghaied us onto this devil ship.

And deep water meant heavier seas. Seas meant seasickness. My stomach was in bad enough shape, having had no rum.

"What then?" I asked.

"Portsmouth, Bowman."

"The wizard wins? *Dragon* runs to his beck? We do his murders for him?"

"I don't know, Bowman. He's the crux. He's the answer. Whatever happens, it'll revolve around him. He's in Portsmouth. We'll take our questions to him."

There was uncertainty in Colgrave's voice. He, the megalithic will round which my universe turned, no longer knew what he was doing. He just knew that something had to be done.

"But Portsmouth? You're sure?"

"He's there. Somewhere. Masquerading as something else. We'll find him." There was no doubt in him now. He had selected a course. Nothing would turn him aside.

I could not fathom Colgrave's thinking. He wanted to take *Dragon* into the very den of our enemies? Just to confront that sorcerer again? It was pure madness.

No one had ever accused Colgrave

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of being sane. And only the once had he come out loser.

We sailed north. We turned and ran south once Tor could no longer discern land from the maintop. A steady breeze scooted us along. By nightfall, according to Toke, we had come back south of the southernmost tip of Freyland. But Colgrave did not alter course till next morning. Several hours after dawn he ordered a change to a heading due east.

He shifted course a point this way, a point that as we sailed along. He had Toke and Tor put on or take off canvas.

A plan was shaping in his twisted mind.

Time lumbered along. The sun set, and it rose. Tension built up till we were all ready to snap. Tempers flared. Some of the old hatred returned. We were not very tolerant of one another.

The sun set again.

I had seen Colgrave's matchless dead reckoning before. I was not overwhelmed when he brought *Dragon* into the mouth of the Silverbind Estuary with the same accuracy I showed in speeding a shaft to its target.

We were all dismayed. To a man we had hoped that he would change his mind, or that something would change it for him.

We had not seen one ship during our time at sea.

They had taken our false trail for true. The fleet had cleared Portsmouth only that morning, heading north in hopes of catching us in the wild seas between Freyland and Cape Blood. The only vessels we saw now, as we eased along the nighted Itaskian coast, were fishing boats drawn up on the beaches for the night.

Watchfires burned along the Estuary's north shore. They winked at us as if secretly blessing our surreptitious passage.

Those winks conveyed messages. A steady flow were coming from the north. Fat Poppo tried reading them, but the Itaskians had changed their codes since he had been in their navy.

No one noticed our little caravel creeping along through the moonless night.

The lights of Portsmouth appeared on our starboard bow. Little bells tinkled over the water ahead. Then Poppo softly announced that he had spotted the first channel-marker buoy.

Its bell pinged happily in the gentle swell.

Colgrave sent Tor to the forecastle to watch the markers.

He meant to try the impossible. He meant to take *Dragon* up the channel by starlight.

Colgrave's confidence in his destiny was justified. *Dragon* was surely a favored charity of the gods that night. The breeze was absolutely perfect for creeping from one bellbuoy to the next. The current did not bother us at all.

We penetrated the harbor basin two hours after midnight. Perfect tim-

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ing. The city was asleep. Colgrave warped *Dragon* in to a wharf with a precise beauty that only a sailor could appreciate.

Fear had that ship by the guts. I was so rattled that I don't think I could have hit an elephant at ten paces. But there I was on the forecastle, ready to cover the landing party.

Priest, Barley, and the Trolledyngjan jumped to the wharf. They searched the darkness for enemies. Mica and the Kid jumped. Others threw them mooring lines. They made fast in minutes. The gangplank went down for the first time in anyone's memory. Toke and Tor started ushering the men ashore. Tor made sure they were armed.

Some did not want to go.

I was one. I had not set foot on any land in so long that I could not remember what it was like.... And this was the country of my birth. This was the land of my crimes. This land loved me no more, nor wanted its sacred soil defiled by the tread of my murderer's feet....

Nor did I want to do any sorcerer's bloodletting.

Colgrave beckoned.

I had to go. I relaxed my grip on my bow, descended to the maindeck, crossed to the gangplank.

Only the Old Man and I remained aboard. Toke and Tor were trying to maintain order on the wharf. Some of the men were trying to get back to the ship, to escape stable footing and everything that land meant. Others had fallen to their knees and were kissing the paving stones. Some, like Barley, just stood and shook.

"I don't want to return, either, Bowman," Colgrave whispered. "My very being whines and pules. But I'm going. Now march."

The old fire was in his eyes. I marched.

He had not changed clothing. He still wore rags and tatters. Following me down the gangplank, he looped a piece of cloth across his features the way they do in the deserts of Hammad al Nakir.

Colgrave's presence made the difference. The men forgot their emotions. Toke quickly arranged them in a column of fours.

A late drunk staggered out of the darkness. "Shay...." he mumbled. "What're.... Who're...." He almost tripped over me and Colgrave.

He was an old man young. A beggar, by his look, and a cripple. He had only one arm, and one leg barely functioned. He reeked of cheap, sour wine. He stumbled against me again. I caught him.

"Thanks, buddy," he mumbled. His breath was foul.

My god, I thought. This could be me if I keep on the grog.... I forced honesty. I was looking at what I had been when I had committed my murders, and most of the time since.

All I could see was ugliness.

The drunk stared at me. His eyes grew larger and larger. He glanced

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over the crew, peeered at the Old Man.

A long, terrified whine, like the plea of a whipped cur, ripped from his throat.

"Priest!" the Old Man snapped.

Priest materialized.

"This man recognizes us. Man, this is Priest. Do you know him too? You do? Good. I'm going to ask some questions. Answer them. Or I'll let Priest have you."

The drunk became so terrified that for several minutes we could pry no sense from him at all.

He did know us. He had been a sailor aboard one of the warships that had helped bring us to our doom. He had been one of the few lucky survivors. He remembered the battle as if it had taken place yesterday. Eighteen years and a sea of alcohol had done nothing to erase the memories.

Eighteen years! I thought. More than half my lifetime.... The life I had lived before boarding *Vengeful D.* The whole world would have changed.

Colgrave persisted with his questions. The old sailor answered willingly. Priest shuffled nervously.

Priest had been the great killer, the great torturer, back when. He had loved it. But the role did not fit him anymore.

Colgrave learned what he wanted. At least, he learned all the drunk had to tell.

A moment of decision arrived. The old sailor recognized it before I did.

It was the moment when a man should have died, based on our record.

A black bird squeaked somewhere in *Dragon's* rigging.

"There is a ship at the wharf," Colgrave said. "Barley! The keys." Barley came. Colgrave gave the keys to the drunk. He stared at them as if they fit the locks in the one-way gates of Hell.

"You will board that ship," Colgrave told him. His tone denied even the possibility that his will might be challenged. "You will stay there, drinking the rum behind the lock those keys fit, till I give you leave to go ashore."

The watchbird squawked again. Excited wings punished the night air.

Fog started drifting in from the Estuary. Its first tendrils reached us.

The drunk looked at Colgrave, stunned. His head bobbed. He *ran* toward *Dragon.*

XII

"Bowman, come," Colgrave said. "You've been to Portsmouth before. You'll have to show me the way to the Torian Hill."

I did not remember ever having been to Portsmouth. I told him so, and suggested that Mica be his guide. Mica was always talking about Portsmouth. Mostly about its famous whorehouses, but sometimes about its people and their strange mores.

"You will remember," Colgrave told me. He used the same tone that he had directed at the drunk.

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I remembered. Not much, but enough to show him the way to the Torian Hill, which was the area where the mercantile magnates and high nobility maintained their urban residences.

Dawn launched its assaults upon the eastern horizon, though in the fog we were barely aware of it. We began to encounter early risers. Some instinct made them avoid us.

We passed out of the city proper, into the environs of the rich and powerful. Portsmouth was not a walled city. There were no gates to pass, no guards to answer.

We broke from fog into dawnlight halfway up the Torian Hill.

It was not like I remembered it. Mica's expression confirmed my feeling.

"There's been a war pass this way," he said. "Only a couple years ago."

It was obvious. They were still picking up the pieces. "Where are we going?" I asked Colgrave.

"I don't know. This's the Torian Hill?" Mica and I both nodded.

Colgrave dug round inside his rags, produced a gold ring.

"Hey!" Mica complained. "That's...." He shut up.

A glance from Colgrave's eye could chill the hardiest soul.

"What is it?" I asked Mica.

"That's my ring. I took it off the wizard's ship. He said I could have it. I put it down in the ballast with my other things."

"Must've been more than just gold."

"Yeah. Must have been." He eyed Colgrave like a guy trying to figure how best to carve a roast.

He would not *do* anything. We all had those thoughts sometimes. Nobody ever tried.

Colgrave forced the ring onto a bony little finger, closed his eyes.

We waited.

Finally, "That way. The creature is there. It sleeps."

I caught the change from *he* to *it*. What had changed Colgrave's mind? I did not ask. During the climb he had become the mad captain again.

People began to notice us. They did not recognize us, but we were a piratical-looking crew. They got the hell away fast.

Some were women. We had not laid hands on a woman in ages...

"Sailmaker." Colgrave said it softly. Mica responded as though he had been lashed. He forgot women even existed, let alone the one he had begun stalking.

We came to a mansion. It skulked behind walls that would have done a fortified town proud. The stone was grey, cold limestone still moist from the fog.

"Bowman. You knock." He waved everyone against the wall, out of view of the gateman's peephole.

I pounded. And pounded again.

Feet shuffled behind the heavy gate. The shield over the peephole slid

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aside. An old man's eye glared through. "What the hell you want?" he demanded sleepily.

Colgrave dropped the cloth concealing his face. "Open the gate." He used the voice that had made Mica forget a skirt, that had driven a drunk aboard *Dragon*.

The old man croaked, "Gah... Gah..."

"Open the gate," Colgrave told him.

For a moment I did not think that he would.

The gate creaked inward an inch.

Colgrave hit it with his shoulder. I lunged through after him, nocking an arrow. Colgrave seized the gateman's shirt, demanded, "Where is he? The thing in red?"

I do not think he knew the answer. But he talked.

Something growled. Barley eased past us and opened the mastiff's skull with a brutal sword stroke. Priest silenced a second growler.

Men charged toward us from between shrubbery, from behind trees. They had no intention of talking things over. They had blades in their hands and murder on their minds.

Yet it was not an ambush. Ambushers do not pull their pants on as they attack.

"I don't think we be welcome," the Trolledyngjan drawled laconically.

I sped a half dozen arrows. Men dropped. The crew counter-charged the rest.

"Do it quietly!" Colgrave ordered.

They did. Not a word was spoken. Not a warcry disturbed the morning song birds. Only the clang of blades violated the stillness.

I sped a couple more arrows. But the men did not need my help. They had the defenders outnumbered. I turned to Colgrave.

He had the gatekeeper babbling. Aside, he told me, "Lock the gate." I did.

"Come on, Bowman." Colgrave stalked toward the mansion. He left the gatekeeper lying in a widening lake of blood.

A black bird scolded from the limestone wall.

This was the Colgrave of old. This was the mad captain who killed without thought or remorse, who fed on the agony and fear of his victims....

The creature in red was not going to be pleased with him.

I recovered my spent arrows, running from victim to victim so I could keep up with the Old Man. I recognized some of the dead. They had crewed the sorcerer's ship.

The thing they dreaded had overtaken them after all.

"Where are we headed?" I asked Colgrave.

"Cellars. The thing's got to be hiding under the house somewhere."

"Hey! What's going on?" A sleepy, puzzled, powerfully built gentleman of middle years had come onto the mansion's front porch. He still wore his

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night clothes. Servants peeped fearfully from the doorway behind him.

I never found out who he was. Somebody important. Somebody who had thought he could get the world by the ass if he allied his money and political pull with the magical might of the creature in red. Somebody driven by greed and addicted to power. Somebody laboring under the false impression that his mere presence would be enough to cow low-life rogues like ourselves. Somebody who did not know that deals with devils never come out.

He was in for a big disappointment quick. Nobody faced Colgrave down.

The Old Man grabbed him exactly the way he had grabbed the gateman. The man lunged, could not break Colgrave's hold. "The thing in your cellar. What is it?"

The man's struggles ceased. He became as pale as a corpse. "You know?" he croaked. "That's impossible. Nobody knows. He said that nobody would ever find out...."

"He did? Who is he? What is he?" Aside, "Tor. Toke. Surround the house. Be ready to fire it if I call."

"No! Don't burn...."

"Colgrave does whatever he damn well pleases. Answer me. Where is he? Why did he call us back...."

"Colgrave?"

"Colgrave. Yes. That Colgrave."

"My God! What has he done?"

I bowed mockingly. "They call me Bowman. Or the Archer."

He fainted.

The servants scattered. Their screams dwindled into the depths of the house.

"Priest. Barley. Mica. Bowman. Trolledyngjan. Come with me." Colgrave stepped over our host, into the house.

"Catch one of the servants."

Mica came up with one in seconds. She was about sixteen. His leer betrayed his thinking.

"Not now," Colgrave growled.

Mica, too, was reverting.

"Girl," Colgrave said, "show us the way to the cellar."

Whimpering, she led us to the kitchens.

"Barley. You go down first."

Barley took a candle. He was back in a minute. "Wine and turnips, Captain."

"Girl, I'll give you to Mica if...."

Something screeched. Lamps overturned and pottery broke in a room behind us. I whirled. A black bird waddled into the kitchens.

I said, "She probably doesn't know, Captain. It's probably a hidden doorway."

Hatred flamed from Colgrave's eye when he glanced my way. "Uhm. Probably." He fingered the gold ring he had plundered from Mica's hoard. "Ah. This way."

We surged back into the front rooms. Everyone pounded panels. "Here," said Colgrave. "Trolledyngjan."

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The northman swung his ax. Three resounding blows shattered the panel.

A dark, descending stairway lay behind it. I seized a lamp.

"Barley goes first," the Old Man said. "I'll carry the lamp, Bowman. I want you behind me with an arrow ready."

It would be tight for drawing, but I had my orders.

XIII

The stair consisted of more than a hundred steps. I lost count around eighty. It was darker than the bottom side of a buried coffin.

Then light began seeping up to meet us. It was a pale, spectral light, like the glow that sometimes formed on our mastheads in spooky weather. Colgrave stopped.

I glanced back up. The servant girl stood limned in the hole through the panel. The waddling silhouette of a black bird squeezed past her legs. Another fluttered clumsily behind her, awaiting its turn.

We went on. The stair ended. An open door faced its foot. The pale light came splashing through, making Barley look like a ghost.

He went on. He was shaking all over. There was nothing in the universe more deadly than a terrified Barley.

Colgrave followed him. I followed Colgrave. Priest, Mica, and the Trolledyngjan crowded us. We spread out to receive whatever greeting awaited us. Barley was a step or two ahead.

The creature in red reposed on a dark basaltic throne. The floor surrounding it had been inscribed with a pentagram of live fire. The signs and sigils defining its angles and points wriggled and gleamed. The floor itself seemed darker than a midnight sky.

This was the source of light. The only source. There were torches atop the red thing's throne, but they were not alight.

The creature's eyes were closed. A gentle smile lay upon its delicate lips.

"Kill it?" I whispered to Colgrave. I bent my bow.

"Wait. Move aside a little and be ready."

Barley started forward, blade rising. Colgrave caught his sleeve.

At the same instant one of the black birds flopped past us, positioned itself in Barley's path.

"We're here," Colgrave said softly, to himself. "So what do we do now?"

He had altered again. Once more he was the mellowed Colgrave. The old Colgrave did not know the word *we*.

"You don't know?" I whispered.

"Bowman, I'm a man of action. Action begets action, till resolution... My goal has been to get here. I haven't thought past that. Now I must. For instance, what happens if we do kill this thing? What happens if we don't? To us, I mean. And to everyone else.

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Those aren't the kinds of things Colgrave usually worries about."

I understood. Tomorrow had never mattered aboard *Dragon*. Life on that devil ship had been a perpetually frozen Now. Looking backward had been a glance at a foggy place where everything quickly became lost. Looking ahead had consisted of waiting for the next battle, the next victim ship, with perhaps hope for a little rape or drunkenness before we fired her and leaned back to enjoy the screams of her crew. Tomorrow had always been beyond our control, entirely in the hands of whimsical gods.

They had taken remarkable care of us for so long, till they slipped us that left-handed one with the Itaskian sorcerer....

Here we stood at a crossroads. We had to decide on a path, and both went down the back side of a hill. We could only guess which was the better.

If we could even glean a hint of what they were. The trails were virtually invisible from this side of the crest.

"Ready your arrows, Bowman," Colgrave told me. "If he needs it, put the first one between his eyes. Or down his throat. Don't give him time to caste a spell."

"What'll your signal be?"

"You make the decision. There won't be time for signals."

We locked gazes. This was a new Colgrave indeed. Technique was my private province, but the decision to shoot had never been mine.

"Think for *Dragon*," he said. And I realized that that was what *he* was trying to do, and had been for the past several days. And Colgrave was unaccustomed to thinking for or about anyone but himself.

As was I. As was I.

A tremor passed through my limbs. Colgrave saw it. His eyebrow rose questioningly.

"I'll be all right." I nocked a different arrow. The motion was old and familiar. My hands stopped trembling. "You see?"

He nodded once, jerkily, then spun to face the creature in red.

It remained unchanged. It slept, wearing that insouciant smile. "Wake him up," Colgrave ordered.

Barley started forward.

"Don't enter the pentacle!" the Old Man snapped. "Find another way."

The Trolledyngjan took an amulet from round his neck. "This be having no potency here anyway," he said. He flung it at the sleeper.

It corruscated as it flew. It trailed smoke and droplets of flame. It fell into the sorcerer's lap.

The creature jumped as if stung. Its eyes sprang open. I pulled my arrow to my ear.

Mine were the first eyes it met. It looked down the length of my shaft and slowly settled back to its throne, its hand folded over the amulet in its lap. We had dealt it a stunning surprise, but after that first reaction it hid

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it well. It turned its gaze from me to Colgrave.

They stared at one another. Neither spoke for several minutes. Time stretched into an eternity. Then the thing in red said, "There is no evading fate, Captain, I see what you mean to do. But you cannot redeem yourself by killing me instead of those whom *I* desire slain. In fact, unless I misread you, you have slain to reach me. Wherefore, then, can you expect redemption?"

His lips were parted a quarter inch, still smiling. They never moved while he spoke. And I was never sure whether I was hearing with my ears or brain.

I do not know what was on Colgrave's mind. The sorcerer's remarks did not deflate him. So I presume that he had seen the paradox already.

"Nor can you win redemption simply through performing acts. There must be sincerity." There was no inflection in his voice, but I swear he was mocking us.

I remembered an old friend who had disappeared long ago. Whaleboats had never been very sincere. Unless he had hidden it damned well.

"The damned can be no more damned than they already are," Colgrave countered. A grim rictus of a smile crossed his tortured face. "Perhaps the not-yet-damned can be spared the horror of those who are."

My eyes never left my target, but my mind ran wild and free. This was Colgrave, the mad captain of the ghost ship? The terror of every man who put to sea? I had known him forever, it seemed, and had never sensed this in him.

We all have our mysterious deeps, I guess. I had been learning a lot about my shipmates lately.

"There is life for you in my service," the sorcerer argued. "There is no life in defying me. What I have once called up I can also banish."

"This be no life," the Trolledyngjan muttered. "We be but Oskoreien of the sea."

Priest nodded.

Barley was poised to charge. Colgrave caught his sleeve lightly. Like the faithful old dog he was, Barley relaxed.

I relaxed too, letting my bow slack to quarter pull. It was one of the most powerful ever made. Even I could not hold it at full draw long.

I stopped watching the sorcerer's eyes. There was something hypnotic about them, something aimed specially at me.

His hands caught my attention. They began moving as he argued with Colgrave, and I ignored his words for fear there would be something compelling hidden in his voice. His hands, too, were playing at treacheries.

I whipped my shaft back to my ear.

His hands dropped into his lap. He stopped talking, closed his eyes.

A wave of power inundated me. The creature was terrified of me! Of *me!*

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It was the power I had felt as *Dragon's* second most famous crewman, while standing on her poop as we bore down on a victim, my arrows about to slay her helmsman and officers. It was the power that had made me the second most feared phenomenon of the western seas.

It was the absolute power of life and death.

And in that way, I soon realized, he was using me too.

I had the power, and he did fear me, but he was playing to my weakness for that power, hoping that it would betray me into his hands. In fact, he was counting on using all our weaknessess....

He was a bold, courageous, and subtle one, that creature in red. Whatever the stakes in his game, he was not reluctant to risk losing. Not one man in a million would have faced *Dragon's* crew for a chance at an empire, let alone have recalled us from our fog-bound grave.

He spoke again. And again he made weapons of his hands, his eyes, his voice. But he no longer directed them my way.

He chose Barley. It made a certain sense. Barley was the most wicked killer of us all. But I held the power of death, and Barley would have to get past Colgrave and Priest to take it away from me.

He whirled and charged. And the Trolledyngjan smacked the back of his head with the flat of his ax. Barley pitched forward. He lay still. Colgrave knelt beside him, his eye burning with the old hatred as he glared at the creature in red.

I nodded to the Trolledyngjan. I was pleased to see that I was not alone in my awareness of what the sorcerer was doing.

"I think you just made a mistake," Colgrave said.

"Perhaps. Perhaps I'll send you back to your waiting place. There are other means to my ends. But they're much slower...."

"You shouldn't ought to have done that," Priest said. "Barley was my friend."

What? I thought. You never had a friend in your life, Priest.

One of the black birds shrieked warningly. Colgrave reached out....

Too late. Priest's left hand blurred. A throwing knife flamed across the space between himself and the creature in red.

The sorcerer writhed aside. The blade slashed his left shoulder. His left hand rose, a finger pointing. He screamed something.

"Wizard!" I snarled.

And loosed my shaft.

It passed through his hand and smoked away into darkness. He looked down the length of my next shaft. His bloody hand dropped into his lap. Pain and rage seethed in him, but he fought for control. He wadded his robe around his hand.

My gaze flicked to Colgrave. We

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had a stand-off here. And unless the Old Man did something, that wizard would pick us off one by one. Colgrave had to decide which way to jump.

Colgrave had to? But he had told me.... But....

XIV

All the black birds had joined us. They were big. I called them albatrosses, but their size was the only thing they had in common. They lined up between us and the wizard. Their pupilless yellow eyes seemed to take in everything at the same time.

They were doing their damndest to make sure we knew they were there.

I had always been aware of them. For me they had become as much a part of *Dragon* as Colgrave or myself. What were they? Lurkers over carrion? Celestial emissaries? Sometimes, because I sympathized with their plight, I wanted to make them something more than what they were.

Those sentinels posted by a dead man were as trapped as we. Maybe more than we were. Their exit might be even narrower.

Neither Colgrave nor the creature in red paid them any heed. To those two the birds were squawking nuisances left from another time.

Those squawking nuisances had been trying to guide us since our recall. We had seldom heeded them. Maybe we should have.

Why were they trying to intercede? That had to be beyond their original writ. That, surely, had been but to keep their summoner informed of what was happening amongst *things* he could only banish, not destroy.

I suppose his last-second death compelled them to interpret their mission for themselves.

One squawked and threw itself into the pentagram.

There were sorceries upon that bird. It was nothing of this world. The spells shielding the thing in red were less efficacious against it than they had been against arrow, dagger, or amulet.

Nonetheless, it fell before it reached the sorcerer. The stench of smoldering feathers assailed my nostrils. Smoke boiled off the writhing bird. It emitted some of the most pathetic sounds I had ever heard.

Then, like the bird the sorcerer had downed at sea, it became a snake of smoke and slithered off like black lightning, through air and cellar wall.... I presumed.

The thing in red had begun some silent enchantment. We now faced it amidst a vast plain, walled by mists instead of limestone.

A second bird threw itself into the pentacle the instant the first changed and hurtled off.

It penetrated a foot farther. Then a third flopped clumsily forward, achieving perhaps fourteen inches more than the second.

Mica's voice echoed eerily from the

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mist behind us. "Captain. Bowman. Hurry up. There's a big mob in the street. They're armed. We're in trouble if they break in."

Another bird hurled itself at the sorcerer. This one managed to sink its beak into an ankle.

The sorcerer called down a thunderbolt. It scattered flesh and feathers.

Another leapt.

The Old Man said, "Have Toke and Tor gather the men behind the house, Sailmaker. If we're not up in ten minutes, go back to *Dragon*. Tell them not to wait for us. They'll have to clear the estuary before the fleet gets back from Cape Blood."

"Captain!"

I could read Mica's thoughts. What would they do without Colgrave? *Dragon* would become lifeless without the dead captain's will animating it.

"Do as I say, Sailmaker."

Two black birds threw themselves into the pentacle together. The sorcerer got the first in midair. The second landed in his lap, tearing with beak and talons.

They *had* to be driven by more than their original assignment. Maybe the gods were interceding....

Barley clambered to his feet with the Old Man's help. He was groggy. Colgrave dithered round him.

The grumble of a crowd working itself up reached the cellar.

We were in trouble.

"Maybe we ought to run for it," Priest suggested.

Colgrave hit him with that one cold eye. "Colgrave doesn't run." Then, "We have an enemy here." He indicated the thing in red. "He's decided to send us back. We have to stop him. Sixty men counting on us.... I don't want any of us to go back. It's for forever this time."

"I'll buy that," I muttered. It reflected my thinking of the moment. But I was surprised to hear it from the Old Man. It was not his kind of thinking.

It seemed that the black birds had been trying to stop us from compounding our sins. That was all I could get their admonitory squawks to add to. "Sorry, guys," I murmured. A sin or two looked necessary for the greater welfare.

I did not want to see that quiet, fog-bound sea again. Eighteen years was long enough. The others felt the same.

I could see just one way to get out of it. Kill the sorcerer in red.

Another murder.

What was one more death on my soul? I asked myself. Not a pennyweight.

The last black bird hurled itself into the pentagram.

The sorcerer was covered with blood, reddening its clothing even more. Pain had destroyed the delicacy of its face. And yet a tiny smile began to stretch its lips again.

I drew to my ear and let an arrow fly.

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The others had the same idea at the same instant. The Trolledyngjan hurled his ax. Priest and Barley flung themselves against the waning Power of the pentagram. Colgrave drew his blade and followed at a more casual pace. The Trolledyngjan whipped out a dagger and joined him.

My arrow and the Trolledyngjan's ax did not survive the smashing fist of a lightning bolt. Both weapons touched the creature in red, but only lightly.

The last bird became another serpent of night and slithered off to wherever they went when they devolved.

The spells protecting the sorcerer gnawed at Priest and Barley. They screamed like souls in torment.

And kept on.

They were Colgrave's favorite hounds, those two. Because nothing stopped them.

They had been the two most dreaded in-fighters on the western seas.

A continual low moan emanated from the Trolledyngjan. Colgrave made no sound at all. He just leaned ahead like a man striding into a gale, his eye fixed on the sorcerer's throat.

Priest and Barley went down. They writhed the way the birds had. But they kept trying to get to the creature in red. Barley's blade struck sparks from the stone beside the wizard's ankle.

Its smile grew larger. It thought it was winning.

I sped three arrows as fast as I could.

The first did no good at all. The second pinked him lightly. It distracted him for an instant.

His attackers surged at him, threatening to bury him.

I sent my third arrow beneath Colgrave's upraised arm. It buried itself in the creature's heart.

The Old Man's blade fell. It sliced the flesh away from one side of that delicate face.

The thing slowly stood. A mournful wail came from between its motionless lips. The sound rose in pitch and grew louder and louder. I dropped my bow and clapped my hands over my ears.

That did not help. The sound battered me till I ached.

The Trolledyngjan was down with Priest and Barley. I did not expect them to rise ever again.

The creature in red touched Colgrave. My captain started to drop too.

He fell slowly, like a mighty kingdom crumbling.

"Go, Bowman," he told me in a voice that was hardly a whisper, yet which I heard through the sorcerer's wail. "Take *Dragon* back to sea. Save the men."

"Captain!" I seized his arm and tried to drag him away. The thing in red touched him. The touch anchored the Old Man.

"Get the hell out of here!" he growled. "I'll handle him."

"But...."

"That's an order, Bowman."

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He was my Captain. These were my comrades. My friends.

"Will you get the hell gone?"

He used the old Colgrave's voice. It was strong. Compelling. I could defy it then no more than ever before. I seized my bow and fled.

XV

The others had needed little urging to make a run for it. Mica and the Kid were the only ones hanging around when I hit the mansion's door. Not counting the owner and half an army of citizens headed our way.

It was your basic mob. A ravening killer monster made up of harmless shopkeepers. An organism without fear because it knew its components were replaceable.

Mica screeched, "Come on, Bowman! You going to wait till they tie you to a burning stake?"

I was not as numb as I looked. I was looking for the thousand-eyed monster's brain cells. I had eight good arrows left.

But Mica was right. The mob did not have a brain. Random fragments had begun vandalizing the grounds.

I took off round the side of the house.

As we loped along, the Kid asked, "What happened down there? Where's Barley and Priest and the Trolledyngjan and the Old Man?"

"Down there. All gone but the Old Man and the sorcerer. The thing is all chopped up, but it's still alive."

"You left him there?"

"He made me, Kid. You ever win an argument with Colgrave?"

He just grinned.

"Hold up for a second, Bowman," Mica panted. We were in the street now and drawing some startled looks. "What happens when they go?"

"What?"

"Colgrave runs us. What do we do without him? And that wizard called us back. What happens when he dies? To his spells?"

"Oh. Man. I don't know." I was no expert on wizardry. Some sorceries devolved with the death of the sorcerer, and some did not. I could not tell him what he wanted to know.

There were shouts behind us. I wheeled. Part of the mob was after us.

"Let's take them," the Kid said.

There were about twenty of them. For a *Dragon* sailor, protected by the Bowman, the odds did not look bad.

The earth started quivering like a bear in restless slumber. The timbers of nearby buildings creaked.

Our pursuers stopped, looked back.

We could see the steep tiled roofs of the mansion. Cracks lightninged across them. They began sagging, as if some huge invisible hand were pressing downward....

The cracks leaked a black fog that looked first cousin to the one that dogged *Vengeful D.* The breeze did nothing to disperse it.

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"Let's hike," I said. "While they're distracted. Maybe we can catch the others."

I was afraid Toke and Tor would sail without us.

Could anger be an absolute? The cloud over the mansion said it could be. I felt it from a quarter mile away.

That shadow was a being. It echoed the feeling I had been given by the creature in red. I now understood our ambiguous reactions to the sorcerer. He or she had no meaning if the thing were not human at all.

It was not alone. A second being held it in a deathgrip. That being radiated an absoluteness too, an utter refusal to yield to any other will.

"Colgrave," I whispered.

Colgrave had been a man, of that there was no doubt. But he had been larger than life and animated by a determination so unswerving that it had made him a demigod.

"Children of evil," Mica muttered.

We resumed walking toward the waterfront. No one interfered. We were forgotten.

The Torian Hill shook like a volcano about to give birth.

"What?" I asked.

"We are all children of evil," Mica said.

"What're you talking about?" He was off on some sideways line of thought, saying the obvious and not meaning what he was saying. "Keep stepping. I don't think the Old Man will win this one."

"He already has, Bowman. He's forced that thing to take its natural form. Look. It's fading. It can't stay here that way."

He was right. The thing was evaporating the way a cloud of steam does.

So was the thing created by the will of my Captain.

In minutes they were gone.

There were tears in my eyes. Mine. The Bowman's. And I was the deadliest, coldest, most remorseless killer ever to sail the western seas, excepting only the man for whom my tears fell.

I had hated him with a passion as deep and black and cold as the water in the ocean's deepest deeps. Yet I was weeping for him.

I averted my face from the others.

I had not wept since I did not know when. Maybe after I had killed my wife, when I had been alive and still one of the smaller evils plaguing the world.

We reached *Dragon*. They had the mooring lines in but the gangplank still down. The crew manned the rail. Their eyes were on the hills behind the city. Their faces showed relief when we raced onto the wharf. Then dismay when they realized we three were the last.

They had the drunk at the head of the gangplank, holding him like a hostage against Portsmouth's ill-will.

"The others?" Toke asked.

"They won't be coming," I replied.

"What do we do?"

"You're asking me?" He was First

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Officer. He should have taken charge.

He looked me in the eye. He did not have to speak to tell me that he was no Colgrave, that he was incapable of commanding *Vengeful Dragon*.

I glanced around. Every eye fixed me with that same expectant stare.

I am the Bowman, I thought. Second only to Colgrave... Second to none, now. "All right. Mica. Take the old guy and leave him on the wharf. Healthy. Tor, stand-by to make sail."

Some of them looked at me oddly. Letting the drunk go was not *Dragon's* style.

But *Dragon* had changed. We had learned, just a little, the meanings of pity and mercy.

"Give him something to tell his grandkids," I remarked to Tor, whose disappointment was obvious. He was the most bloodthirsty and least changed member of the crew.

A breeze rose as the gangplank came in. It was a perfect breeze. It would carry us into the channel at just the right speed. I assumed Colgrave's old place on the poop and peered at the sky. "You still with us?" I murmured.

I started. For an instant I thought I saw faces in the racing clouds. Strange, alien faces with eyes of ice, in which no hint of motivation could be read.

Was this what Colgrave had seen? Had he just looked up whenever he wanted to know if the gods were still with us?

I had a lot to learn if I was going to replace the Old Man.... I looked at the clouds again. I saw nothing but clouds. Imagination?

I paused to reflect on the fact that I was the only survivor among *Dragon's* four great evils.

Why? What had they done that I had not? Or was it the reverse?

The crew seemed thin. How many had been redeemed? "Toke, take a muster."

"I have, Captain. We lost five besides those you know. One-Hand Nedo, Fat Poppo...."

"Poppo? Really? He said he knew.... I'm glad for him. But we'll miss them all."

"We will, Captain."

Mica's "We are all children of evil" returned to me. I think I understood now. He was stating the reason why I could not understand why some had been redeemed and some not. The evil in us was such that we could not recognize facts laid openly before us. It would take a moment of truth, an instant of revelation, to drive the message home.

I remembered sitting with Priest and Mica and the Kid, fishing, pulling in a sand shark that just could not quit hitting our hooks. I glanced at the clouds and wondered if they would quit the way we had quit trying to teach that stupid shark.

XVI

The dividing line between the sea and the Silverbind's flood is as sharp as

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a pen stroke. Turgid brown against slightly choppy jade. The two do not mix till you are out of sight of land.

Dragon is in the brown, straining toward the green. We have bent on every piece of canvas we can find. Lank Tor is up top yelling things nobody wants to hear.

"Another one, Captain. On the starboard quarter."

Their sails crowd the north. They came back in a hurry.

I try to think like Colgrave. What would he do?

Colgrave would fight. Colgrave always fought.

I try to remember his face. I cannot. The forgetfulness of *Dragon* is at work. Before long he, and the others, will be completely forgotten and we'll have a whole new style.

It is necessary. Colgrave was incapable of backing down. But *Dragon* is no longer invincible. These Itaskian's fathers proved how vincible we are. They just have to be willing to pay an extreme price.

I look at the clouds. "You tired of hauling in the same stupid sharks?"

A distant cloud wears a face for an instant. I swear it sticks out its tongue.

The tongue is lightning. It stabs the sea. "Steer for that," I order. The helmsman shifts our heading.

Another bolt falls. Then another and another. The sky grows dark. The wind picks up. *Dragon* fairly dances toward the sudden foul weather. The sails in the north seem to bounce in anger as this slim chance to escape develops.

"Damn you!" I shake a fist at the sky. For an instant I think I hear mocking laughter.

The seasickness is grinding my entrails already. It will be tearing me apart after we hit the storm.

The gods do have senses of humor. But the level seems to be that which ties the tails of cats for draping over clotheslines.

Lightning bolts are falling like the javelins of a celestial army. The helmsman is nervous. He keeps glancing my way, awaiting the order to turn away. Others join him.

Nobody asks questions.

My predecessor trained them well.

Now they are hitting the sea around us. We have never seen anything like this....

"Tor?"

"They're coming after us, Captain."

Those bold, brave fools. They would be. They know the game well now. They know they have to be as determined as we.

The granddaddy bolt of them all hits the mainmast. Tor shrieks. The mast snaps. Topmen scream. The Kid tumbles through the rigging and hits the maindeck with a thud I can hear over the roar of wind and sea. The masts, the spars, the lines and stays all begin to glow. *Dragon* crawls with a pale, cold fire that must be visible for miles.

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She rides up a mountainous wave and plunges down its nether side.

Darkness comes, sudden and sharp as a swordstroke.

I am striding across the poop when it does, intending to take a look at the Kid.

I trip into the rail when the light returns as suddenly as it went. I catch myself, look around.

We are in a bank of dense fog. The sea is absolutely still. "Damned! No."

The fogs thins quickly. I can see my command.

The men are scattered over the decks, motionless, eyes glassy. I know where we are, what has happened. We have returned to the beginning, and Colgrave's sacrifices were in vain.

The jokes of the gods can be damned cruel.

The fog gives way. We glide into the heart of a circle of lifeless jade sea. Lethargy gnaws at me. It takes all my will to take up my bow so I can use it as a prop on which to lean.

I will not go down. I will not fall. I refuse. *They* do not have the Power....

Dragon eases to a stop and begins revolving slowly in the imperceptible current. The featurless face of the fog slides past. The mist overhead is light sometimes, and sometimes dark. It does not make an exciting sky. Before long I lose interest in counting the days.

It will not be long before I cease to think at all.

Till then, I must try to find the answer. What did I do wrong?

Coming soon

We have just received the manuscript of THE ORACLE AND THE MOUNTAINS, the third in **Stephen King's** fine series about the last gunslinger and his quest for The Dark Tower. It is tentatively scheduled for the October anniversary issue, along with a new People story by **Zenna Henderson,** and lots more.

Featured next month is THE BRAVE LITTLE TOASTER, which is subtitled "A Bedtime Story for Small Appliances." It is an absolutely charming narrative, unlike anything the author, **Thomas M. Disch,** has ever written. Look for the **Gahan Wilson** cover illustrating the story, on the August issue, on sale July 1.

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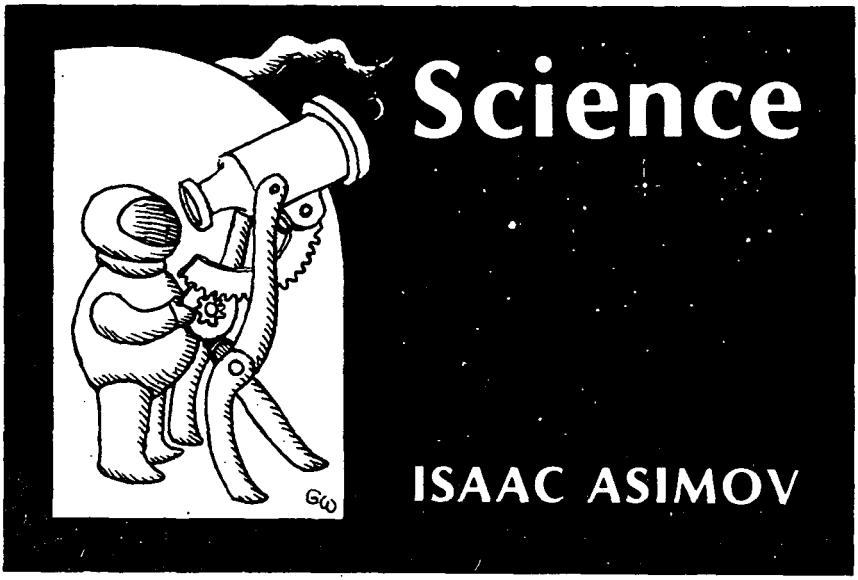

SIRIUSLY SPEAKING

I suppose it's no secret that I have been a child prodigy. (It can't be a secret, says my good friend Lester del Rey, because I talk about it all the time.)

Of course, I know many people who have been child prodigies but, as far as I know, I was the only one to enjoy it. I just loved being smarter than the next kid.

What's more, I wasn't bored in class because there was always the teacher to bedevil. I wasn't lonely through inability to relate to children my age because, aside from being a prodigy, I was adequately childish. I wasn't ostracized by my peers for the crime of being bright because I was also a disciplinary problem in class, which made them all decide I was a decent sort.

In fact, I love being a child prodigy so much I hate to let go. Being an adult prodigy always seems pale in comparison, but at my age, I think that in a few years I'm going to have to settle for it.

Anyway, I've been leafing through *The Science Fiction Encyclopedia* (Doubleday, 1979) and it suddenly occurred to me that it tells me just how

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old all my good science-fiction-writing buddies are — so that I can make invidious comparisons.

For instance, a decade ago the Science Fiction Writers of America voted on the best short stories of all time, with the rules requiring that only one story be chosen from any one author. As a result, the "best" stories of each of 26 different authors were chosen and placed into an anthology.

I have just gone over the list of stories in that anthology and, with the help of *The Science Fiction Encyclopedia*, have worked out the age of the author at the time each of the stories was published.

The senior author to achieve the list was Murray Leinster, who published his classic "First Contact" when he was 49. The junior author to achieve the list (are you ready?) was Isaac Asimov, who published his classic "Nightfall" at the age of 21).

I'm not through. Which story of the 26 finished in first place (even though I didn't vote for it myself?) You're right. It was "Nightfall."

Now I have always maintained that "Nightfall" is *not* the best story I've ever written, let alone the best ever written by anyone (whatever the votes say). I am willing to say this much, however, in my child-prodigy pride. It's the best science fiction story of *any* length ever written by *any* person who had not yet attained his 22nd birthday.

—And why am I telling you all this? Because in an essay I recently wrote to correct an insufficiency of knowledge displayed in an earlier essay, I managed to commit another and worse insufficiency of knowledge and now I have to correct *that*. Feeling stupid, I had to do something to cheer myself up.

I've done so and now I can begin:

Imagine a sphere in space with a radius of 8.8 light-years and the Sun at its center. The volume of that sphere is 2,850 cubic light-years.

That's a big sphere. The Sun, at the center, giant globe though it is, takes up only 5×10^{-24} (five trillion-trillionths) of that volume.

Imagine a smaller sphere with the Sun at the center, one with a radius of 7.4 billion kilometers (4.6 billion miles). That would be large enough to include even the orbit of Pluto, and all the Solar system, in fact, but for some far-flung comets. This Solar-system-sphere would still be only 7×10^{-11} (70 trillionths) of the volume of the larger sphere. In comparison with the 8.8-light-year-radius sphere, the entire Solar system shrinks to a dot.

Yet that huge sphere becomes small if viewed in another way. A sphere with a radius of 8.8 light-years takes up only about 1.4×10^{-10} (1/7 of a

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billionth) of the volume of the Milky Way Galaxy.

This is roughly the area of a square city block as compared with that of the United States. We are perfectly correct, then, in considering the 8.8-light-year-radius sphere as representing our immediate stellar neighborhood, our own city block in the midst of a large nation.

The question that then arises is: How many stars are there in our immediate neighborhood? How many stars live on our block?

The answer is: Counting our Sun, exactly nine.

Working outward from the Sun, we come to the Alpha Centauri system of three stars, which are, in order of decreasing brightness: Alpha Centauri A, Alpha Centauri B, and Alpha Centauri C. The first two are so close to each other that they may be considered to be at the same distance from ourselves.

Alpha Centauri C, however, is at an immense distance from the other two. It's about 1.6 trillion kilometers (1 trillion miles) from the center of gravity of the A/B system and takes 1.3 million years to make a circuit about it. Right now, it is in that part of its orbit that puts it between the A/B system and ourselves so that it is measurably closer to us than they are. Alpha Centauri C is indeed the closest known star to ourselves, and it is about 4.27 light-years away.

Alpha Centauri C is, however, a small red dwarf, a bit more than 1/20,000 as bright as our Sun. Despite its proximity (by stellar standards) its visual magnitude is 11.05, which makes it far too dim to see with the naked eye. It would have to be a hundred times as bright as it is to show up as a barely visible star in the sky.

Alpha Centauri A and Alpha Centauri B are 4.37 light-years away. Of the two, Alpha Centauri A is virtually the twin of our Sun — the same mass, the same temperature, the same luminosity.

Alpha Centauri B is a substantially smaller star. It has a diameter of 973,000 kilometers (605,000 miles) as compared to 1,390,000 kilometers (864,000 miles) for Alpha Centauri A or the Sun. Alpha Centauri B is only about 0.28 times as luminous as either Alpha Centauri A or the Sun.

Either Alpha Centauri A or Alpha Centauri B, if shining alone in the sky, would be a "first-magnitude" star. Alpha Centauri A has a visual magnitude of -0.01 and Alpha Centauri B one of 1.33.

We do not see them separately, however. They are so close to each other that to the unaided eye they seem like a single dot of light, with a visual magnitude of -0.1. This makes it the third brightest star in the sky.

Moving out from the Alpha Centauri system, we encounter three single

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stars: Barnard's Star, Wolf 359, and HD95735, at distances of, respectively, 5.9, 7.6, and 8.1 light-years. These are all red dwarfs that are invisible to the naked eye.

Of these three, the brightest is HD 95735, which has a hundred times the luminosity of Alpha Centauri C, and a visual magnitude of 7.50. Were it but two and a half times more luminous than it is, it would be just visible to sharp eyes on a very clear Moonless night.

Barnard's Star is about midway in luminosity between Alpha Centauri C and HD 95735 and has a visual magnitude of 9.54.

The dimmest of all the stars on our block is Wolf 359. It has only about a third the luminosity of Alpha Centauri C and has a visual magnitude of 13.53, despite its relative closeness to ourselves.

That gives us seven of the nine stars. For the last two, we must move out to a distance of 8.65 light-years, almost at the edge of the block, and there we will find an oddly-assorted pair of stars, Sirius A and Sirius B.

Concerning Sirius B, I have spoken in HOW LITTLE? (F&SF, September 1979). It is a white dwarf star with the mass of the Sun and a volume just under that of the Earth. Its visual magnitude is 8.68, which places it between HD95735 and Barnard's Star in apparent brightness. It is even further at a disadvantage for it is drowned out in the resplendent light of its companion, Sirius A.

Sirius A is the aristocrat of the block. It is both larger and hotter than the Sun. In diameter it is 2,500,000 kilometers (1,550,000 miles) across, which makes it very nearly 1.8 times as wide as the Sun and 5.8 times as voluminous. It has 2.5 times the mass of the Sun, and it has a surface temperature of 10,000° C. as compared to the Sun's 6,000° C. All told, it is 23 times as luminous as the Sun.*

As a result of Sirius A's luminosity and its closeness to us, its apparent visual magnitude is -1.45, making it the brightest star in the sky by a considerable margin.**

Sirius A (which from now on we need call only Sirius) was bright enough to attract the attention of the ancients. It would have done so in

**In all these properties, it holds no records. There are stars far more voluminous, and massive, and hotter, and more luminous than Sirius — but not on our block.*

***If Sirius is the brightest and Alpha Centauri A/B is the third brightest, which is the second? That is Canopus, with a visual magnitude of -0.73. Canopus is nearly 200 light-years away, however, and achieves its apparent brightness only because it is some 5,200 times as luminous as our Sun and 225 times as luminous as Sirius A.*

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any case but the Egyptians paid it special attention owing to a peculiar coincidence. Let me explain—

The Sun moves in the sky relative to the stars generally, an effect produced by the Earth's revolution about the Sun. Every 24-hour period, the Sun moves 0.986 degrees eastward against the background of the stars so that, at the end of a solar year of 365.2422 days, it has moved 360 degrees eastward and has made a complete circle about the sky.

If we consider some particular star that happens to rise with the Sun on some particular day ("heliacal rising" from Greek words meaning "near the Sun"), the next morning that star will be 0.986 degrees west of the Sun and will rise 3.95 minutes earlier than the Sun, and the next morning 3.95 minutes earlier still. It will go more and more out of phase until, after six months, the star will be rising as the Sun is setting the night before (so to speak). Then, finally, after exactly one year, that star will be rising with the Sun again.

The Egyptians noticed that the star Sirius (which they called Sothis) rose with the Sun at just about the time the Nile rose in flood, and they felt this to be an important signal from the gods and watched for it.

It was clear that the heliacal rising of Sirius occurred every 365 1/4 days, and that helped the Egyptians set up a solar calendar that ran 365 days to the year and that ignored the phases of the Moon—this at a time when other ancient people used the less convenient and more complicated Lunar calendar.

To be sure, the Egyptians ignored the fraction of a day and kept the year a steady 365 days, year in and year out. That meant that the calendar lost a quarter-day each year. If the heliacal rising of Sirius took place on January 1 in a particular year, it would take place on January 2 four years later, January 3 four more years later and so on. (This could have been avoided if the Egyptians had adopted a leap year convention. They knew enough to do so, but clung to tradition — just as we cling to the stupidities of our own calendar because of tradition.)

After 1,460 years (365x4), Sirius would rise on January 1 again, and so 1,460 years was called the "Sothic cycle."

Not only did all this mean that Sirius rose with the Sun at different days of the year as time went on, but that the Nile flood arrived at different days of the year. Still, the Egyptians could count on the heliacal rising of Sirius as harbinger of the Nile flood whatever the day of the year.

Now imagine Sirius to be rising earlier every morning and catching up to Sunrise again. Suppose a day comes when it rises, say, 10 minutes after

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the Sun. Naturally it would be invisible in the Solar glare by the time it rises.

The next day it would rise 4 minutes earlier and top the horizon only 6 minutes after the Sun—and would still be invisible. The next day it would rise 2 minutes after the Sun—and would still be invisible.

The next day, however, it would rise 2 minutes *before* the Sun, and it would be seen very low on the eastern horizon in the brightening dawn for just a very brief time before the Sun's edge peeped above the horizon.

After that, Sirius would rise earlier and earlier and be higher and higher in the sky at Sunrise, but the Egyptians would not be interested in it then. It was the heliacal rising that gripped them.

In 3000 B.C., the heliacal rising of Sirius came about three days before the normal time of beginning of the Nile flood at the Egyptian capital of Memphis. However, what with the precession of the equinoxes and Sirius's own motion, the heliacal rising slowly drifted. By 2000 B.C., the heliacal rising of Sirius came 5 days *after* the start of the Nile flood and by 1000 B.C., it came 23 days after. Sirius no longer seved as harbinger, but by then the Egyptian calendar and traditions had been fixed.

Now comes the mystery I mentioned in HOW LITTLE? A number of the ancients reported Sirius to be a red star though we ourselves see it as pure white. Why should that be?

In HOW LITTLE? I advanced the notion that Sirius B, before it was a white dwarf, had been a red giant and at that time might have drowned out the glitter of Sirius A. Perhaps the collapse from red giant to white dwarf had occurred some 1500 years ago. Sirius B would then have disappeared as a visible object, and would have left Sirius A glowing. Sirius would then have turned from red in ancient times to white in medieval and modern times.

I actually thought this notion was original with me and advanced it as such, simpering with modest pride, and that is the "insufficiency of knowledge" I referred to in the introduction to this essay.

Fortunately, I have readers who are knowledgeable in any field in which I expose my ignorance, and they write to me at once. In this case, it was Dr. Charles F. Richter (of the famous Richter Scale for measuring the intensity of earthquakes) who wrote to tell me of many earlier suggestions of this precise theory.*

**I have used his letter, and an article "Sirius Enigmas" by Kenneth Brecher in a book entitled "Astronomy of the Ancients" (MIT Press, 1979) for what follows.*

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Worse yet, the theory is not a tenable one, however often it is and has been advanced.

When a red giant shrinks to a white dwarf, the result is a "planetary nebula," and the white dwarf is surrounded by a haze of gas. Slowly the haze of gas expands and thins out and eventually is no longer visible — but this takes time.

If the collapse of Sirius B had taken place fifteen hundred years ago, there would still have remained visible traces of this haze. Such traces have been searched for and there are no signs of it. Sirius B could not therefore have collapsed one or two thousand years ago; one or two hundred thousand years ago would be more like it.

In that case, how else can we explain the fact that the ancients reported Sirius to be red?

One possibly useful suggestion was first advanced by G.V. Schiaparelli (the Martian-canal Schiaparelli) a century ago.

Consider that the great astronomical event of the year for the early Egyptians was the heliacal rising of Sirius. As the time approached, they must have watched with religious excitement for the first glimpse of Sirius in the eastern horizon in the bright desert dawn.

And when Sirius appeared just above the horizon it looked reddish for the same reason that the setting Sun or the rising Sun looks reddish. Light-scattering is more efficient the shorter the wave-length and takes place more extensively when a great thickness of atmosphere is traversed. The light from the Sun, or a star, passes through a greater than usual thickness of the atmosphere when at the horizon; the short wavelengths of light are scattered and the long wavelengths of red and orange tend to survive.

Most stars are so dim that when part of their light is scattered, what is left isn't bright enough to make an impression on the relatively insensitive color-vision apparatus of the human eye. Sirius, in fact, is the only star bright enough to look red at the horizon.

It would be natural, then, for the Egyptians to think of Sirius as reddish. To be sure, Sirius is white when it is high in the sky, but it is red *when it counts* — at the time of heliacal rising.

We don't have enough of the ancient Egyptian astronomical records to be sure that they classified Sirius as red, but it seems a reasonable hypothesis, and the Greeks may have been influenced by this Egyptian view.

Next, consider this —

During the heyday of the Greeks, the heliacal rising of Sirius took place

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in the second half of July, at the time of maximum summer heat.

There was a natural tendency to imagine that Sirius, which was so unusually bright for a star, delivered a substantial amount of heat to Earth and that when this was added to that of the Sun all day long, as it should, near the time of the heliacal rising, the Earth would suffer especially high temperatures.

Sirius is the brightest star of Canis Major ("Great Dog" — often viewed as the hunting dog of the nearby constellation of Orion, the Hunter). It was because of Sirius' supposed added heat that the hottest weeks of summer were called "the dog days" and in fact, are *still* so-called. Furthermore the added heat of the dog days was supposed to breed pestilences and fevers (very likely, if it hastened the spoiling of food and the activity of parasites).

Here, then, is how Homer, at the start of the 5th book of "The Iliad" describes the glory of Diomedes as Athena helps him arm for battle: "She kindled a flame that blazed steadily from his helmet and shield, like the star that shines brightest of all in late summer after his bath in the Ocean. Such was the fire that blazed from the head and shoulder of Diomedes..."

Sirius (the star that shines brightest of all) seems here to be equated with "fire" and "flame." Does that refer to Sirius's ruddiness, as is sometimes suggested? Or does it refer to Sirius's traditional heat? My own feeling is that it refers to the latter.

Then, in the 22nd book of "The Illiad," Sirius is referred to again in connection with Achilles' armor: "His armour shone on his breast like the star of harvest whose rays are most bright among many stars in the murky night; they call it Orion's Dog. Most brilliant is that star, but it is a sign of trouble, and brings many fevers for unhappy mankind."

There the baleful aspect of Sirius is emphasized.

Vergil, who carefully copied every aspect of Homer, has Aeneas' armor gleam like that of Diomedes or Achilles in the 10th book of "The Aeneid." There it says: "Aeneas' helmet blazed. A stream of fire poured from his plumy crest. A golden fount gushed from the great shield-boss. — As on a clear night comets glow with a grim and blood-red gleam, or as the glare of Sirius, the star that brings to frail mortality disease and thirst and rises sicklying heave with boding light."

Here again, the reference is to Sirius's baleful aspect.

But what about the association of Sirius with the "blood-red gleam" of comets? Doesn't that mean that Sirius is also blood-red?

Not at all! The fact is that comets are *not* blood-red. However, comets are considered baleful omens of disaster, predicting death and destruction

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to mankind. The feeling is that they portend war, murder, civil turmoil, all sorts of blood-letting violence. Hence they predict "blood-red" events and are, by poetic compression, described as "blood-red" themselves.

It is a terrible mistake to expect poets to be literal rather than metaphoric and to base sober theory on the expectation of literalness.

To take a modern example, when Emily Dickinson says, "Not one of all the purple host that won the flag today..." do you suppose that she was talking necessarily of people with purple skins or purple uniforms?

No! What Dickinson was doing was making a condensed poetic reference to the tradition, as old as the Byzantine Empire, that equates purple with royalty. The winning hosts were kings of the field, and were therefore purple.

To be blue is to be of a certain color, *or* it is to be in a state of emotional depression.

To be green is to be of a certain color, *or* it is to be young and/or inexperienced.

If you're a "golden boy" you're multi-talented, if you're "yellow" you are cowardly and, in either case, your actual skin color may be pink-and-white, or chocolate brown.

I'm sure it's the same in other languages, and that in every one of them color-words have numerous associations that have nothing to do with the color itself except, at best, through distant analogy or poetic association.

Anything dire and baleful is bound to be thought of as bloody, and anything bloody is bound to be thought of as red. It is therefore not surprising at all, if people speak of anything that is lowering and threatening as "red."

By Vergil's time, it may well have been fashionable to speak of Sirius as red, referring not to its literal color, but to the fact that it threatened mankind with misfortune. Thus, Seneca, in 25 A.D., a generation after Vergil, said, "The redness of the Dog Star is deeper, that of Mars milder, that of Jupiter nothing at all." But was he speaking of literal color or of the intensity of misfortune portended, in the astrological sense. I suspect the latter.

If we eliminate all poetic references, we are left with one overriding problem involving Ptolemy, the crowning astronomer of ancient times.

There are five bright stars that visibly show a reddish or orange tint. They are Aldebaran, Antares, Arcturus, Betelgeuse and Pollux. Ptolemy mentions them all as "hipokeros" a word which may be translated as reddish, or yellowish.

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But he adds a sixth! Sirius!

How is that possible?

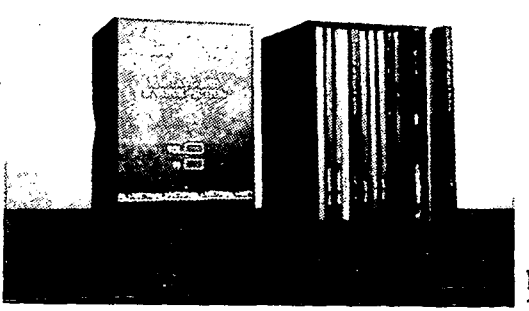
Well, consider first that Ptolemy lived and worked in Egypt and must have been surrounded by Egyptian records and ways of thought, and we already know that Egyptians might naturally think of Sirius as reddish.

Secondly, as pointed out by Kenneth Brecher, the copies of Ptolemy we now have are certainly not the two-thousand-year-old originals. The oldest copies we have can only be traced back a thousand years and have already been translated from Greek to Arabic and back to Greek. Who knows what errors of copying and translation may have crept in?

In the oldest copy, for instance, we have a summary at the end which says that there are "five red stars" — which is correct. Was Sirius added later in the body of the book by someone who was overly-influenced by poetic descriptions or Egyptian tradition, or by sheer accident?

By the 10th Century, the Arabic astronomers were listing only five red stars and omitting Sirius — and they must surely have had access to copies of Ptolemy older than any we now possess.

My conclusion? The mysterious redness of Sirius in Greek times is no mystery because it wasn't red, and was never said to be red in any literal sense.



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This story about a rare human specimen being observed by two very different aliens is from a new contributor who writes: "Born 1950, grew up in what was a rural section of Delaware, left for Boston University in 1968. Married in 1971, finally settled in Cape Cod. Presently live in a house overrun with two children and fifty houseplants and work part time as a waitress in a fried fish joint."

Found

BY

MELISSA LEACH DOWD

Tak, the (poet) drifted step by gliding step down the dusty path. He, the anachronism, was the only Aldernossi to dwell on the surface of the planet. Some of the others had exterior tunnels that were still operable, but only one showed signs of frequent use. Strange that of all the Aldernossi, it should be the respected Ged that the (poet) chose as his companion. Not odd that the (poet) would choose him, for who could predict the actions of the (poet)? But it was unusual that the epitome of detached curiosity suffered the emotional ramblings of Tak. Ged was the ideal of the observor subspecies. Perhaps he put up with the poet out of a respect for tradition. The poet subspecies had been extinguished, but the Aldernossi kept an archetype alive, and the Aldernossi, even their comparatively romantic forebearers, did nothing without a reason.

Tak would have explained it — if any had been interested in his point of view — differently:

"He has his mind bent upon the deliniation of the cosmos. I listen to the music of the stars — why should the two be incompatible?"

This day the poet was wandering towards Ged's door slowly. He had overheard a conversation between two lesser observors, discussing the master's latest interest. Tak had no doubt that the two were accurate — to be inaccurate was high on the list of Aldernossi sins — but he wondered that Ged would turn his attention to as obscure and *inobjective* a branch of study as the physiology of a primitive species from across the galaxy.

Tak was unsure whether *Homo sapiens* was an existing species or an extinct one. But as Ged's last scholarly passion concerned fluctuations in the

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gravitational fields of certain binary star systems, the poet was curious as to what had drawn the patient Ged so abruptly into such an unusual field.

Tak drew a flute out of his sash and blew a tentative note, then lifted his head and gazed out over the yellow-brown plain. It was not too hot to be borne, and there even seemed to be a trace of moisture in the breeze. Perhaps he would leave Ged to his study and play the flute out here. Ged never objected to the flute, but it was obvious that the purposeless sound annoyed him. Ged's patience was only for his studies, and Tak was not in a teasing mood.

He was only a few steps from the mouth of Ged's tunnel now, holding the flute irresolutely halfway to his lips. A strange sound welled from the subsurface — a rasping, low pitched cry. Tak's head came around as if his name was called. The cry came again, and he put away the flute.

At the end of the tunnel, cold light illuminated a room with walls literally covered with instrumentation. Most of the space behind the walls was taken up by information-storage systems of various types, but one end of the room showed signs of hasty remodeling. A tank filled with fluid of an unpleasant color had been installed in one wall, and before it was a table tank containing a large animal specimen. Ged was bending over the large tank, taking a tissue sample.

Coming closer, Tak could see that the creature was still alive, not merely a preserved specimen from the Archives. It was biped, with a large cephalic appendage — the creature must be at least semi-intelligent. To have altered his laboratory, Ged must be embarking on an entirely new study program. Very strange, when for so many years he had shown no interest in zoology.

"What is this?" Tak asked, stepping to the observor's side.

Ged kept his eyes on his work, but his voice betrayed satisfaction.

"A human. Examine it carefully, poet; they are rare in this section of the galaxy."

Tak obligingly leaned over to peer at the specimen. "It is ugly," he said after a moment.

"It is damaged. Radiation burns, and many structural injuries."

"Where did you get it?"

"I picked it up with a drone ship after its habitat was destroyed."

Tak gave Ged an uneasy glance. "Its habitat was destroyed? By natural forces?" Ged would think nothing of kicking up an ant heap, to procure a few specimens for study.

"No — another emergent species located its base and destroyed it out of paranoia. Such disturbances are common with species of this class."

Tak looked at the creature with sympathy. "It is intelligent, then. Poor creature. If its planet was destroyed, is it the last of its species?"

"I did not say 'planet.' It was an art-

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ificial habitat, constructed for the purpose of crude research into certain frequencies of the electromagnetic spectrum."

"Ah — a fellow observor."

Ged looked up and bared his gum ridges. He evidently didn't appreciate the comparison.

Tak's fingers went absently to his flute. "What are you going to do with it?"

"Repair it. Be silent or leave here."

Tak stood quietly for a few minutes and watched Ged taking tissue samples and keying information into his computers. Then his attention was drawn to the sapient, who had opened its oval eyes and was making the rasping sound again. Tak moved closer, and when the human saw him it quieted, and its eyes widened. He realized it was frightened and held out his hand in an open gesture. The human's hand raised a centimeter or two in response, then dropped back. The hand, Tak noticed with fascination, had only five fingers, two less than the poet. He had never seen an alien creature in the flesh before. The creature's face — quite mobile and expressive, where the skin wasn't too badly burned — relaxed fractionally, then contorted, and it moaned again.

"It is in pain," Tak said aloud, forgetting.

"If I interfere with the nervous system, I will probably kill it," Ged said, going to a screen and pondering a line of chemical symbols. "There is very little available information, and the Xenites have not yet responded to my request."

Tak blinked. The Xenites kept a satellite in orbit around Aldernoss, waiting hopefully for some observor to decide that a desired piece of information would be more quickly acquired if traded for. Generally, information that would interest an Aldernossi was far beyond the competence of a Xenite. But they had built up a reputation for scrupulous accuracy within the limits of their instruments, and occasionally a lesser observor would throw a tidbit their way. For Ged to do so was — unique.

"What are you doing now?"

Tak left hastily as Ged turned toward him. He got a final glance of the human shuddering in the tank; then he was in the tunnel.

Emerging into the waning sunlight, he blew a piercing note on the flute and resumed his stroll on the planet's surface. He began a simple note series to celebrate Suns, added a counterline soft as darkness, then allowed the music to drift where it would, prodding the melody with a changing note now and then. But the harmony kept creeping into a minor key, and the song became a dirge. Tak's attention wandered, he removed his lips from the flute, and the music died away.

He turned once again in the direction of Ged's tunnel. Ged would never allow him to break in again on his concentration, not when his interest was

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so fiercely engaged. Tak looked at the flute, then put it away. There was no music in him. Then he walked quickly back to the tunnel: like Ged, he found the human strangely compelling. He would sit by and be silent and try to absorb whatever strange emotions sustained the thing.

Aldernoss circled its dying star and turned on its axis. Ged worked, and Tak sat motionless while the last natural light faded from the tunnel. Suddenly there was a chattering noise, and Ged's head snapped up. He crossed to an instrument, listened, then spoke a word or two into the transmitter. He listened again, said "Ah," in a satisfied tone, and touched a control. The chattering continued, but Ged was no longer interested. The Xenite, Tak decided, was receiving his payment: information. He wondered idly what knowledge the Xenite had bought — it would bear on a trade problem some way. To a Xenite, there was no such thing as objective curiosity.

Tak ventured to speak.

"You have the information you needed?"

"Yes."

"And this one?" Tak gestured at the comatose human.

By way of reply, Ged picked up a slender instrument and positioned it carefully where the head joined the body. The device whirred delicately, was repositioned, then withdrawn. Ged examined his monitors for a few moments, then grunted.

"It is out of pain."

"Dead?"

"No. I still have much to learn from it."

"Can you save it?"

Ged gave up a small sound, a kind of mirthless chuckle. "Yes, but it will take some time." He looked sharply at Tak.

"You wish to learn, poet?"

"I do, Ged," Tak admitted humbly. For one observor to offer to instruct another was an insult. But Tak had no prestige as a scholar and therefore no reason to take offense.

Ged went to stand before a small screen. Tak trailed him and peered from behind at the two images that appeared. Two humans, recognizably, but subtly different in musculature and exterior physiology. Tak made a sound of distress; the picture pointed up the terrible injuries of Ged's specimen.

The observor leaned over and made a slight adjustment in the image. "The species is bisexual," he said. "Male—" he pointed "—and female."

"Ours is a female?"

"Correct." Ged touched a key, and the images stood revealed without their skin, muscles highlighted. Then the view changed, and the internal organs were shown; again, and the fine wire of the nerves appeared.

"I have severed nerves here, and here..."

"They can be restored?"

"Not restored, but regrown." The screen darkened, and Ged returned to

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the specimen tank. Tak moved to a position where he could see the human's face. "It is conscious," he exclaimed, as her eyes turned toward him. Ged ignored him.

Lucia Beren was aware only that the pain was gone, between one breath and the next. She drifted, savoring the most basic of pleasures: the absence of pain. She rested from the labor of breasting the waves of agony, and finally she opened her eyes.

At first she thought she was blind; then she realized she was focusing on a translucent wall. She followed it with her eyes; it curved up a meter or so, then ended. She was lying in a semi-transparent box.

Something moved on her other side. She turned her head.

In her dream of pain, she remembered the face she saw as a nightmare. It was a skull face, that seemed to float over her. Adrenalin flooded her, and the blood pounded in her head, but she couldn't move, couldn't even cover her face with her hands, and that was a familiar nightmare feeling, too. As she struggled for control, panic cleared her mind and she realized suddenly that she was looking at an alien being. Her scientific training asserted itself, and as she noted physiological structures and postulated their origins, fear left her. The round cranium and dark pits of eyes ceased to resemble a primal horror and became merely nonhuman.

The narrow lips moved, and a series of clicks and sibilants emerged. Lucia shook her head, then closed her eyes again as the motion made her head spin.

I'm hurt, really hurt, she realized, a strange, vital knowing. What had happened? How did she get here? She strained to remember; her mind was fuzzy, and it was so difficult to concentrate. She was in the lab...no, the long shift was over....

The shift was over, and Dr. Barnes, her irascible (some said irrational) mentor was finished with the first phase of his energy-field project. Twelve straight hours of checking, rechecking and making finicky alterations in circuit diagrams was over. The practical phase would start now, and the heat would be on the engineers and the technicians and not on her, the doctoral candidate/flunky. She left the lab, and her thoughts immediately began to run along the paths of her favorite down-winding routine. Brandy, a lounging robe, and some good music. Music — she finally had time to listen to the new tape from Earth, a rarity to be treasured at the station that was named Remote One. Remote it was; and her brother had gone to considerable expense to get the tape on the Service ship that was their only contact with Earth.

She had loaned the tape to her friend Scylla, not having time to listen to it. And Scylla was due to work this

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shift. Lucia started to run, dodging bodies in the crowded corridor. Fortunately, Scylla was never on time for anything—

She pushed the buzzer outside her friend's door and sighed in relief when a grumpy voice said, "Come on in."

The room reflected the mental state of its tenant. The size of a large closet, it was designed to hold a fold-down bunk and collapsible table and chair. The bunk was down, unmade. Drawers that were supposed to close flush with the wall were half open, spilling random articles of clothing — those that weren't already on the floor. A small cosmetic shelf, stained with spilled scent and tints, hung on the wall below a mirror.

Scylla was racing an obstacle course around the room, picking things up and putting them down, collecting scattered articles and dumping them elsewhere.

"I'm in a hurry," she snapped.

"I can see that." Lucia flopped down on the bunk, to catch her breath and be out of the path of Scyl's frenzy. "I love it — just coming off a triple shift and seeing people rushing to get to work."

Scyl made an impolite noise and stuck her head through a turtleneck, emerging with her red hair rumpled in every direction. She studied the effect in the mirror, rumpled it a little differently and looked around for slacks.

"Look on the floor in the head," Lucia suggested.

"Thanks," Scyl said shortly, disappearing into the bathroom. "Why don't you go back to your friends in the lab and leave a lowly technician to get ready for work?"

"Sure — as soon as you give me my tape."

Scylla hopped out of the bathroom, one leg stuck in her pants, looking blank. "What tape?"

Lucia sat up. "You bitch! The tape my brother bribed a Service tech to get to me, that's what tape!"

Scyl nodded, wriggling the pants over her hips and sliding a finger over the closure. "Don't get your bowels in an uproar," she said mildly. "I remember. I'll get it for you when I come off duty. I don't have time right now—" she glanced at the wall chronometer. "Ye gods and little fishes! I'm late now!"

"You're going to be *permanently* late when I'm done with you. You swore you wouldn't loan it or even tell anybody it existed!" Lucia stood up and pinned her friend with her best glare.

"I didn't loan it! It's safe as houses — I just put it someplace," she evaded. "I've had it two days; you can wait one more shift—" She started for the door, but Lucia got there first and stood with her back against it.

"You've had it for two days, while I lived in a laboratory following Julius Barnes around, making circuit diagrams and recording every other word out of his mouth — how well do you know Julius?"

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A corner of Scyl's mouth quirked. "Well enough to know that he has an onion sandwich and a double Scotch every day for lunch."

"Right. He also has a voice that keeps me wanting to clear my throat, and conversation that never strays from circuit models that should have worked, but didn't, and am I sure I transcribed them properly?" Her voice dropped ominously. "I've kept going, and smiled for the sake of my degree, thinking about that tape. Are you going to get it for me? Or shall I have a word with that blue-eyed tech, the one with the shoulders, about the sad, sad time I'm having with Scylla and all the poor young men she has dancing on a string....?"

Scyl glanced again at the chrono and sighed.

"Can you keep your trap shut?"

Lucia made an inarticulate sound of rage.

"All right, all right — it's in Lifeboat 12. Also a player, a box of crystallized fruit, and a bottle of Spanish sherry, which you will kindly keep your mits off."

"Oho," Lucia laughed, moving away from the door. "Why can't you bundle in your own bunk, woman? Or," she added, with a significant glance around the room, "I guess I know why."

Scyl opened the door. "Wasn't bundling," she said with dignity. "I just wanted some solitude — somebody's always bothering me here, but nobody goes in the lifeship bay."

"Damn straight. And you won't either, if they catch you, because you'll be on the next supply boat back to Earth."

"That wouldn't be so bad," the other woman sighed. "Sometimes I think I'd *walk* back, for the sight of a new face."

"You mean a new body."

Scyl shut the door in Lucia's face and started down the hall. Lucia popped out after her.

"Better lay off that candied fruit, hon," she called. "You're getting a little broad across your squat."

As Scylla had just enough plump to be comfortable, and knew it, she didn't bother to reply but speeded her retreat.

Lucia hesitated in the hall. She wanted to get her hands on the tape — but she wanted to be comfortable when she listened to it. Something new — anything new — was a pleasure to be deferred and savored when the time was right; that's why she had waited to listen to the tape in the first place.

She would have a quick shower, she decided, and change her clothes before she went to find the tape.

Later, cleaner and dressed in a lounging robe, Lucia loitered with elaborate unconcern by the lifeship bay pressure door, gathering her courage. Finally she ducked in and had the door sealed behind her again in an instant. She waited, listening. The station was a planetoid, originally just another big rock. Now it was as

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honeycombed with tunnels as a rotten log full of ants. The lifeship bay was located just below the surface; above was only vacuum and stars. The continual thump and tremor of feet overhead, even the omnipresent vibration of circulating fans was muted here. Lucia suddenly felt very far away from the rest of the station.

She turned and walked ahead through the comfortable darkness, past the circular locks with their green glowing numbers. At 12, she stopped and reached out for the lock controls — then drew back her hand.

"It seems to me," she murmured, cupping her chin with her hand, "these ports have telltales in Engineering. Scyl must have known that — I hope." Goosebumps pricked out all over her as she visualized the consequences of her friend's lapse. It was all very well to joke about the missed comforts of home, not the least of which was a change from the same everlasting faces, but she had come to Remote in the first place because it was an opportunity to work with the most creative theorists and sophisticated equipment. When Julius Barnes returned triumphantly to his university to publish, she would follow undramatically in his wake. She would be sitting pretty, especially if Julius or one of his ilk make a major breakthrough, with a new doctorate, familiar with the new design technology, and perhaps even mentioned in a footnote.

But not if she were returned ignominiously to Earth for violating a restriction, one of the very few in the nonmilitary station.

Lucia removed the snap plate that covered the section of wall around the lock controls. Sure enough, there was a severed connection; contact dots were pried up in three places. Scyl had a fair and foolish air, but she rarely fluffed the essentials.

She replaced the panel and thumbed the lock button. The port dilated smoothly. She stepped through, and it closed silently behind her.

The lifeship was a metal bubble, fitted with a powerful beacon, a good life-support system, and a pitiful excuse for an engine. The last was capable of a short burst of power at high speed, but there was very little space for fuel storage and none for sophisticated navigational equipment. It was not designed to have any kind of range as a vehicle but to sustain a few human lives for several weeks or, minimally, a couple months.

Lucia stood with her hands on her hips, looking around, and admitted to herself that her friend had chosen a cosy den. The lifeship had the compact charm of the small sailboats she used to play in as an undergraduate. The designers had used every trick they could to project *security* rather than *trapped in a little box.*

Scylla had added her own refinements. On the head panel of an open bunk was the bottle of sherry, a small rack of tapes, and a player. There was

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a puffy quilt folded neatly over the foot of the bunk. Lucia arranged it as a back rest, poured herself a glass of sherry — there were two glasses; like hell Scyl didn't use the place for bundling — and quickly shuffled through the tapes. She gave a little grunt of satisfaction when she found the right one and slipped it into the player slot. Music swelled in the little room. Lucia settled back into the quilt and took a sip of wine. The sherry was buoyant and powerful — so was the music. She and her brother shared a passion for Neo-classical jazz, and he obligingly made tapes of concerts and broadcasts and sent them to her when he could afford the freight. Now he had some friends in Service that weren't above a little bribery, she might get them more often. This tape was a commercial one by her favorite group: Chi Taymore's New Deans of Old Blues. Lucia sipped her sherry, and Julius Barnes, the station, and the technical worries of high-energy micro-circuitry drifted far away.

She indulged in a pleasant reverie of returning to Earth, pockets full of Out pay, and going out on the town with her brother and one of his muscular friends. Like the handball player — the one who wouldn't recognize a circuit unless he shorted it with his fingers. They would go to a concert — she could see the band; the clarinello solo was beginning — all the other instruments had dropped out but the sax. Now the sax was gone too, and the pure notes of the 'nello were like golden Spanish sherry....

She was dozing, the remains of the sherry trickling stickily into her lap.

The concert hall was hot, and the music was changing. So loud and shrill — why were they playing like that? She was going to have to leave if they didn't turn it down—

The jolt of the engine firing woke her. It cut off again immediately, but the interior lighting came on, and a pressure suit popped out of a storage compartment in the wall next to the bunk. Still half asleep, but thoroughly frightened, she pulled the suit to her and struggled into it.

"Jesus, am I in trouble," she moaned. Something must have set the lifeboats off accidentally — what a furor there would be when it was discovered that one of them had an occupant.

The engine cut in again and the ship lurched violently, throwing Lucia back onto the bunk. The tape player flew into the aft bulkhead with a crash. Lucia turned over against the acceleration, meaning to stow the tape player where it wouldn't get bounced around anymore, then froze as she caught a glimpse of the computer screen. The navicomp had clicked on with the engine, but what it showed her seemed impossible. She waited for a lull in the engine noise, then flung herself into the pilot's chair. She stared at the screen.

She saw a clear representation of unseen sphere of space around her little

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craft: there was the green blip, sparked with red, that was herself. Other green blips would be the other lifeships — the big green mass, Remote. The screen was laced with blue streaks that had to be some kind of energy discharge, arcing into lines along the magnetic field of the planetoid. Along the side of the screen a grid appeared, and information began to pour into the navicomp.

Barnes' energy field? Impossible. The first prototype wasn't even near completion yet. Some other experimenter at the station? One of Lucia's main functions was fighting with the other departments for computer time and a bigger share of available energy. Barnes' project was the single biggest power user at the station, a fact other departments harped on. She knew of no other project on anything approaching the scale of Barnes'.

She peered closer. The info grid was not intended for humans; it fed too fast for her to read it. It and the screen image were stored in the navicomp for expert retrieval.

The image of Remote was becoming indistinct at the edges, and she thought once or twice that she caught a glimpse of blue fire through a green gone tenuous.

She examined the control panel in glances torn away from the screen, furiously trying to remember how to adjust the field of vision. The homing beacon — a red switch prominent in the center of the board — drew her eye. The first thing she was supposed to do was turn on the homing beacon. Her hand hovered over the switch, and she glanced back at the screen — in time to see a yellow spark appear and circle and a green dot flare up and disappear. Another yellow dart blinked onto the screen, and another. Lucia's hand slammed down on the board, but it was the *emergency acceleration* switch she aimed for, not the beacon. The little ship's engine boomed. Lucia was pressed back into the couch with iron gentleness, and the remains of the tape player slammed into the aft bulkhead. Foolish tears for the lost music blurred her eyes, but she blinked and tried to focus on the screen, to locate herself and see if any yellow darts were moving towards her.

She found the point that indicated her own position. She never saw the spark, but it was there. The screen went white, and an instant later the shock wave rattled her inside the pressure suit. Half-stunned, she watched fascinated as white fracture lines swept across the interior plastic; then, still gripped by the couch, she could see stars through the hull. There was a soundless flash to the right. An instant later she and the chair were thrown tumbling with stars and debris whirling around her. She felt the radiation searing through the pressure suit and heard, or felt, the sound of snapping bones. Then the light was gone.

When awareness seeped back, it was accompanied by a whisper of music, and for a moment she imagined

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herself back in the lifeship. Memory returned: the pain of her first waking, the terror of the second. Her mind seemed clearer, this time, but it was the clarity of a candle flame burning out the last drop of wax.

She opened her eyes and turned toward the music. The skull-faced creature was sitting by her head, playing a twin-bareled, many-keyed instrument. Or perhaps it was accompanying a recording, for surely there was too much song coming from one source. The creature's eyes were fixed on infinity, and it seemed serene.

Lucia turned her head. She saw a wall of instrumentation as complex as the controls of a star cruiser, and less comprehensible. Gauges registered in subtle blends of colors as often as written symbols; impossible even to guess at their function. Inset in the wall was a tank similar to the one she lay in, but smaller. It held a murky, star-colored fluid unpleasantly shot through with crimson. An amorphous mass floated in it, and busy before it was another alien. It was different from the musician, she realized. It was half a meter taller, and more slender, as if there was hardly any flesh covering the bones. The musician's head had a little crest of stiff hair, and a few wisps clung to its skull around the flat membranous ears. The other was hairless. It wore a single garment of brown, and this vaguely troubled her. Hospital or laboratory, it should be wearing white. She looked back at the other one. Its garment was a full robe that hung in folds, concealing the shape of the body in a swirl of — aquamarine? The color seemed to deepen as she watched.

The flute player noticed her eyes on it, and the song trailed away. It hissed a few words, but its fellow didn't respond.

Lucia gathered her courage and tried to sit up. Her head lifted a few inches off the tank. The pressure suit had been lifted and cut away, where it was not charred together with the skin under it. A sharp pain burned across her face, and she let her head drop back, thinking *nerve damage*. The wrongness of it, the attack on the station, the death of her friends, her own capture, filled her with anger and frustration. She closed her eyes, and tears seeped beneath the lids.

The being at her head spoke again. She turned her face away from it, keeping her eyes tightly shut.

"Let me die," she whispered aloud. "Please, God."

Which god? her thoughts spun. *Which fairy tale to appeal to? Whatever will help me.*

Tak, alarmed, put away his flute. "What is happening?" he asked urgently.

Ged spared a flicker of a glance for the monitors.

"It's dying," he said curtly.

Tak was stunned. "But — you said she would live!"

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"It will."

There was a moment's silence; then Tak irritably dismissed the conundrum. "She is in distress. Do you have the language recorded? If I could speak only a few words to her...."

"No. That was not part of the data I bought from the Xenite. Later, perhaps."

"She's dying," Tak said mournfully. "There is no later, for her consciousness."

Gen paused and turned toward the poet, considering.

"Perhaps not," he admitted. "It doesn't matter. I cannot take samples of her consciousness. I have what I need." He returned to his work.

Tak snapped his gum ridges in anger, took out the flute and gazed sadly at the weeping human.

"Easy so, small one," he said softly. "Easy so. Death comes to all, the mighty as well as the helpless. It is a crowded road you travel."

The human opened her eyes, turned to Tak. He read fear there, and exhausted grief, but a kind of calm, also.

Tak took up his flute and began to play.

He played, and in the eyes of the failing creature he saw reflected energy. He played of life, for was not life a form of energy? He played with life: life was the music and the vibration, for was not energy a form of life? And he played of death, life changed ... energy released. He played, and the eyes began to dream, and blur, reflecting the change that he, Tak the poet, Tak the player, dirged for the universe.

At the proper time the refrain trilled and whispered away, and Tak knew the human was dead. He laid his hand over her eyes for a moment, then straightened up in his seat and put away the flute.

Ged made a sound of triumph. "It is finished," he said. "She will live!"

Tak looked wearily at him but made no protests. Ged would resolve the contradiction.

Ged smiled his cold smile and gestured to the small tank. "Where did

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you come from, Poet?" he asked. "From the flesh of the first poet, who was the same flesh as the last. There, I put it in your own terms so you will understand. Now do you know what this is?"

"A clone. I am not stupid, because my talents lie on a different plane than yours. But it is not the same as this," he said, as he laid his hand gently on the dead woman's shoulder. "Same flesh, same ... chemistry. But not the same."

Ged turned away. What use to argue with a poet? But Tak would not give up the subject.

"No human is of any use, except to its own small self. It amuses me to affect a rescue. I shall bring this one to maturity, then return it. It is the same being, by human law."

Tak was infuriated. It was a gesture typical of the whole observor subspecies: arrogant and sardonic. He hissed the worst insult he could think of. "I think you, too, Ged, have within you the genes of a poet."

Ged turned, surprised. "I thought this gesture would please you, Poet."

"It's wrong, to play so in the lives of intelligent beings."

"But consider. Out of the destruction of a couple hundreds of human lives, I have recovered one. I give the humans back a life they would have lost. Does it matter if it is not quite the original?"

Tak was calmer. "Perhaps not." He stepped up to the small tank and peered in.

"The embryo is too small to be visible. What you see is the placental analog. But it will grow."

Tak left, too deep in thought for further conversation. He was preoccupied with the dregs of death and speculation about the living embryo.

As for the dead one, the lost consciousness, she had no need of regret. She was fortunate indeed, to be played on her way by the Poet of Aldernoss.

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Letters

7 Sources For Carr's Best SF

Dear Ed,

John Clute's review of *The Best Science Fiction of the Year #8* remarks on "the narrowness of the base for selection, with six magazines or anthologies providing the entire contents," and voices a "desperate (though not serious) suspicion" that I was in some sense "biding my time" when I chose the stories. I appreciate the fact that he's not serious in this remark, but it's a serious one to me: I'd rather a reviewer simply hated a book of mine than suggested I might have been loafing on the job.

Had Clute kept accurate count he'd have noticed that the twelve stories in the book came from seven sources, not six; in addition, the Recommended Reading list therein notes stories from six more sources. In all, they range from regular genre publications like F&SF and *Analog* to such less familiar sources for science fiction as *The New Yorker* and *Andromeda 3*, a book that's never been published in this country. (These thirteen are of course only some of the publications I read in order to make my selections.)

I agree with Clute's belief that *The Best Science Fiction of the Year* is a title that's a bit too assertive to be taken literally. As I wrote in the Introduction to the previous volume (*#7*), "I don't really believe there's any such thing as 'the best science fiction of the year'"; the title really describes "the very best book of science fiction short stories, novelettes and novellas that I-as-an-individual-human-being can shape from the offerings of the past year." Which would make a catchy title, perhaps, but it would be hard to fit it onto a book cover.

Clute is a perceptive and conscientious critic; I'm sure he'd prefer to have the correct facts in print.

—Terry Carr

Benford on Macrolife

John Clute's reviews continue sharp-tongued and fascinating. But he does err now and then in matters of fact — in this case, probably because of a late-night and liquored conversation we had. The quotations from me about George Zebrowski's *Macrolife* were, indeed, lifted from an extended critique on an early manuscript. I gave permission for excerpting, but it was not done by Harper & Row, as John asserts.

—Gregory Benford

Len Deighton's alternate world

Having read with the usual feeling of enjoyment Mr. Algis Budrys' column in your March issue, I am nevertheless moved to write in defense of the firm of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. If one is to criticize Knopf's publishing ventures in sf, it is only fair to begin by acquainting one's self with their full scope; and the fact is that Knopf has published at least *one* book of sf by a non-sf writer in 1979 that far outclasses not only Lessing's and Macauley's works, but also at least 85% of the science fiction written by sf professionals. I refer to Len Deighton's novel *SS-GB*, an alternate-history fiction set in a Great Britain overrun by Hitler's Wehrmacht.

The book is *social* science fiction,

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in that it is concerned not with future-or-alternative technologies but with the quality of life in alternative worlds. But as such I believe it meets all of Mr. Budrys' customary high standards. Considered *as sf*, it is not merely entertaining, thoroughly-researched, convincingly-extrapolated, well-plotted, and exquisitely-detailed; it goes right to the heart of what is most important about the difference between this alternative history and our own. Considered as top-quality fiction-in-general, it can be fruitfully compared, say, with the collaboration of sf writer Leigh Brackett and Nobel Prizewinner William Faulkner on the screen adaptation of *The Big Sleep* — it has all the same storytelling and literary strengths. *SS-GB* is a more moving and impressive exploration of this particular alternative history than either Phillip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* or Keith Roberts' "Weinachtsabend," though it lacks Dick's ability to soar into the speculative ether. In my personal opinion, it may be the best sf novel published since Mr. Budrys' own *Michaelmas* — and I mean this as high praise.

What a shame Mr. Budrys had not read this book at the time he wrote his column. I suppose one may offer as defense the fact that *SS-GB* was not labelled science fiction on its dust jacket — but neither are Vonnegut's and Asimov's fictions nowadays. When you get right down to it, it just ain't fair to Knopf.

—Marshall Massey

Silverberg's Jewel

Generally, I enjoy the range and quality of your fiction, the indispensible reviews by (alphabetically) Algis Budrys, Joanna Russ, and Baird Searles, and the et ceteras by Isaac Asimov and Gahan Wilson.

Specifically, I dearly loved Lord Valentine's Castle by Robert Silverberg which I am just now re-reading. I think Silverberg took a lot of risks in writing this sort of novel: it could have been many things — plotless, shallow, juvenile, and so on — none of them good. Instead, it was masterfully written, exhilarating, and a joy to read as it traversed Majipoor to Castle Mount for that final scene with its achingly perfect final line: "Some day soon. When I have time." Ah, but will he *ever* have the time? (No sequels, please.)

Lord Valentine's Castle is a rare sort of jewel: adolescent readers, I'm sure, will enjoy it for its bright, shiny surface; the rest of us will find, if we look, a bit more below. Creeping further out on this limb, I think it'll hit the best seller lists on its way to the Hugo, Nebula, and Locus awards. And of course F&SF will cop the Hugo for best magazine. Congratulations all around.

Welcome back, Silverberg!

—Michael L. Miyeh

Rough Lingo Spoils Story

Most of us, your readers, spend our leisure time reading for pleasure, escape, relaxation, and learning. I started at an early age with Oz, Grimm, Anderson, assorted mythology, "Wonder Stories," "Astonishing," and so on up to present day sword, sorcery, fantasy and science fiction.

Prudishness is not one of my many faults, having been a night club singer, a P.E. instructor, married twice (currently to a newspaper man). I've also raised 3 children of widely varying ages, so have not been protected from the changing phases of teen age activities.

So I think you can accept this gripe

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as legitimate, well considered, and maybe even shared by others less verbose.

I refer of course to "Buoyant Ascent" by Hilbert Schenck in the March issue of your magazine.

Mr. Schenck is so well informed, so verbally provocative, so able to deal with suspense and pathos, so why the hell does he have to screw it up with shithouse lingo?

Why doesn't he extend his efforts to teen age porno books and not slip it into a magazine whose readers have a right to expect quality writing? His filthy vituperation is neither imaginative nor impressive, it can be seen on any Jr. Hi latrine wall, or heard in any beer bar frequented by sub level intellects. It is not fantasy, it is not science fiction, it is not pleasurable, relaxing, or informative.

He almost destroyed the faith in his main character's abilities, and lessened the suspense value of the plot for me — a real waste of what might have been the best story in the publication, and was just lucky that the rest of the stories carried the load and lessened my feeling of having wasted 1/12th of my subscription money.

So much for one senior citizen's opinion; incidentally I send my mag on to my grandson, and he already knows how to spell all those words, so please present us both with more of a challenge in future issues.

—*M. Weeks*

King's Gunslinger

Not only is Stephen King's new sequence of Gunslinger stories wonderful, but even *more* wonderful is for us to share with the author the making, the finding-its-way of a great new novel, attempted, not wholly with success, in *The Stand*. I wish him luck and look forward to future episodes of a work in progress.

—*Ben Indick*

Just thought I would drop you a line in thanks for the Stephen King story "Way Station" in the last issue of *Fantasy and SF*. A new story by Mr. King is more than just a pleasure — it's an event! Now if you could just coax him into publishing another of his masterful horror tales ... well it's a nice thought anyway. I'm waiting with fetid breath for the next segment of the Gunslinger (also an excellent story, by the way) and the Man in Black.

Kudos as well for the Keith Roberts story in the Feb. issue. It was simply stunning — so much so that I've completely forgotten the title of it! Ah well ... it was the most unusual piece of SF I've read in a long, long while. Bronze it and place it on the same shelf as "Loob" and "The Angel of Death." Speaking of which, I picked up the Feb. issue of *Locus* the other day and scanned the Recommended Reading List. I was quite a bit disappointed not finding "Loob" in the listings. I seem to recall it being published in '79. Considering the stiff competition of the wonderful magazines in the field today, your own mag held its own very well — as usual. *Fantasy and SF* continues to publish the highest quality SF and Fantasy stories around.

—*Jason G. Hardy*

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